Watchers From Nowhen

A Novel

Damon Stone

For the creators

Watchers From Nowhen

© Copyright 2026 by Damon Stone

This is a work of fiction. Any names, places, characters, and incidents depicted are either entirely imaginary, or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblances to real individuals - living or dead - locations, events, or business establishments, is unintentional and coincidental.

DEVIATION FILES -

CASE 127

EYES ONLY

CLASSIFICATION

LEVEL: 10

She looked at me like I was a bug. I didn't feel love or warmth in her, though it wasn't a malicious look either. What I got from her was analytical. I was a subject. A specimen. I was an insect she had hatched in a lab, and now she was studying my life cycle. Her version of "motherly love" was, at best, the rapture of scientific curiosity.

-From Session 1 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 01

This all began with coincidences that weren't coincidences. I dreamed of stinkbugs.

Yes. If you can think of anything more hideous, keep it to yourself. Biologists say they look like tree bark, or some organic wood. Camouflage, right? Well, it doesn't fool anyone. I'm not disgusted by bark or wood, but all it takes is a glance at one of these creatures to make me nauseous. If one crawled over a board, I'd spot it a mile away. They shouldn't exist. Larger and crunchier than my thumbnail, and they *fly.* Their wings sound like an airplane from World War II.

Imagine being covered by them. They're crawling over every inch of you. Even more buzz around your head like a swarm of mutant bees. You can't see anything but the swirling, brownish cloud of them, and you *feel* more than hear the jackhammer of millions of wings batter your ear drums. Little teeth sink into your skin—everywhere—and it hurts in an *itchy* way. You're standing inside a tornado and it's nibbling on you.

That was my nightmare. I woke up screaming, trying to shake them off.

As we rational people say, it was “only” a dream. What an “only.” How much denial can we cram into a word?

The same afternoon, I sat in my lab, tinkering with a piece of UFO—some clear, crystalline cube that would seem to be a part of the “engine.” A hopeless thing to do. I’ve had this cube for months and haven’t learned a damn thing about it. But it’s fine. I like a quiet afternoon. If I want to sit with a hopeless cube, that’s my business.

Anyway, I was staring into this thing and something tickled my forearm. My sleeve was rolled up, so I figured the edge of it must have been brushing against me. This was barely a thought. An absent-minded twitch of my arm should have been the end of it. But I still felt these little pinpoints. Prickles creeping up toward my elbow.

I looked down and saw the face of death: there was a *stinkbug on my arm.* If I’d had windows in my lab, my horrified squeal would have shattered them. I grabbed a notebook and swatted the fucker. He hit the floor, stunned. I showed no mercy and stomped him into gushy oblivion. My only regret was for the diarrhea-colored smudge he left on my shoe.

How? Explain it to me. I live a quarter-mile underground. That’s too far for stinkbugs to

burrow. And even if it weren't, the walls of this place are steel and seamless. They can't chew through them and there are no cracks or crevices they could sneak through. Also, this glorified basement is in Utah. There are significantly fewer stinkbugs here than the northeast, where I had my first traumatic encounters with them as a kid.

I want to know the odds of this happening. I want *math.* Because guess what? It gets worse.

Just before bedtime, on the day of my assault by the stinkbug, I was looking for something good to stream.

I use the word "good" loosely. All the choices in this place are old and propagandistic. Black Book would like its employees to forget that the real world still exists above ground. I tend to go for their nature shows. If they're trying to brainwash me with subliminal messages, at least I'll get a relaxing view.

So I thought. Clearly, I'm not only crazy. I'm also stupid.

My TV glowed with a jungle at dusk. Twilight painted the canopies in golden ultra-resolution. I could almost hear angels singing. The camera zoomed far in, right up to a single tree branch. It got so close I could see the lines

of grain spiderwebbing over the wood. And into the frame, like some gigantic B-movie monster, strode a stinkbug. It rubbed its putrid, crusty antennae over the lens. All my heavenly thoughts went down the toilet.

I stared at the demon, braindead. It stared back and mocked me. It must have been a full minute before I gained enough sense to be paranoid. Once I did, I barked the word “fuck” as loudly as I could and scrambled to turn off the screen. All the devices in my domicile are “smart,” so this was more difficult than it needed to be. The stinkbug watched my fumbling attempts to navigate the Home App on my Black Book-issued smartphone. I could sense humor in its compound eyes. It was laughing at me.

Finally, I managed to turn the thing off. Darkness was suffocating. Were they invading the room? Had a swarm of stinkbugs materialized on the walls? I raised my phone, but its light was swallowed by the void. The walls were too far away to catch it—I need a big room to contain my lab and its endless gadgets. Hands shaking, I went back into my Home App and jittered my way to the main lights.

Somehow I got them on. I was so relieved, I thought I lost weight. The place was clean. No stinkbugs. No insects of any kind.

But comfort never lasts.

I lay back on my couch and endured the assault of intrusive thoughts. What did the stinkbugs represent? What did they *mean?* I couldn't believe I was even asking the question. I've never believed in "meaning." Not in any cosmic sense. But what else could explain all this? "Coincidence?" There's another word loaded with emotional repression. "Only" a "coincidence."

Ever since that night I've had this *knowing.* It isn't a "feeling." It's foreknowledge. Something cataclysmic is about to happen to me. I don't know if it will be pleasant. I don't know what it will be, other than impossible. This must have been how the pilots felt who dropped the nukes on Japan. On the way there, they knew they were about to change the world, but they couldn't have told you anything about the new world that was to come.

So, I decided to keep a journal. I have to handwrite it. If I type it in my phone or computer, Black Book will see. They can't download a paper notepad, can they? God, maybe they can somehow.

I suppose that possibility is strange enough to risk. Whatever is happening to me, it must be documented.

11

I didn't sleep much, the night after Stinkbug Day. Real sleep is hard to come by anyway, in this military sewer. None of us have seen the sun since we've been down here. There are "happy lights" buzzing in every hall and every room. That's what Black Book calls them. "Happy." They're meant to simulate sunlight. But our nervous systems aren't convinced. Maybe it's carryover from evolution, going way back to when we were rodents. This far beneath the soil, the body wants to hibernate. So we here in The Underground sleepwalk by default. Our lives are half-dreams. We're undead. We hyper-caffeinate in order to function, which turns us into manic zombies. The coffee machine has become our Grail.

Yes, *the* coffee machine. There's only one, for hundreds of employees, and it's had happier years. There used to be more, but they've gradually died off. Black Book refuses to have new ones installed, because that would be a "Breach of Security." Can't have some installation guy running his plebeian eyes over our base.

It would be so easy for me to build a new one. I have an arsenal of old parts I could finagle for it. But that would be an "Unauthorized Use of Resources." Black Book is a finicky bear. It's best not to poke it.

So we make do with our last surviving clunker. One day, this unsung hero will finally give out and we'll all turn on each other. It's a scary thought. It'll be a dreamy mass hysteria. The hazy unreality of this place will dilute our sense of remorse. Cannibalism may begin to make sense.

These were my thoughts as I stood in line for coffee the next morning. All the cafeteria-goers looked ill. The "happy lights" brought everyone's facial blemishes into startling clarity, an effect that no one found happy at all. Before coffee, on a morning like that, they made me feel dead. Dozens of the most brilliant minds in the world sat hunched over tables, clutching precious mugs in bony hands.

We're pretty introverted down here. Most people have breakfast with "friends" but don't even speak to them. They sit and stare toward each other across the table. I say "toward" because they aren't looking *at* each other. They aren't looking at anything. No visual information is absorbed. They gaze the way corpses do, their minds foggy soups of math, physics, chemistry, and existential crises. All you can hear in this cafeteria is the sound of the coffee machine. It *hisses* at you. Then it vomits your coffee. The final trickling drops have a way of tickling your under-stimulated ear drums.

I, for one, have come to rely on this soundtrack of death and caffeine for my mental stability. It's an anchor. A morning ritual that keeps my fragile threads of sanity from snapping.

That morning though, my peace (?) was shattered. Dr. Carnell walked in.

He stood by the microwave, elbow propped on the countertop, face smeared with the kind of grin that results from a mixture of prestige and mommy issues.

Carnell is *tan,* which is a status symbol down here. It means that, unlike the rest of us, he has regular access to the outside world. He spends half his time in The Underground and half topside, where the base's medical facilities are located. He's the only person I know of, aside from Mr. Gray, with this sort of equal access. And he loves to flaunt it. Carnell brings his *own* coffee, in his *own* mug, straight from topside.

Unfortunately for my blood pressure, his visits to the cafeteria have become commonplace. He used to come only once a week, under the guise of "checking in" on our health, flashing his mug to provoke our envy. Now, he's found a reason to visit almost daily.

Lorelei. The angel-biologist. I wish I knew her real name. She's the "pretty girl" of The

Underground. Thus, Dr. Carnell has concluded that she owes him her affection. You can hear in his voice that her attraction to him is a *given,* a simple matter of fact, despite her obvious loathing of him. It's quite a show, watching him talk to her. A spectacle of narcissism.

He corners the poor woman by the microwave every morning. All she wants to do is heat up her oatmeal. Her big mistake was making this a habit. Now Carnell knows exactly where and when to find her. I don't know why she doesn't find another breakfast. I'd like to know. Maybe she's a picky eater. Maybe she's a slave to routine, as we all become down here. You need to. If you don't, you'll be untethered in featureless time. You'll be stranded in the middle of a sea you can't even drown in.

"It's important to know people who know people," Carnell was saying. "And *I* know people." He beamed like a proud kindergartner.

Lorelei took a short breath through her nostrils. "I'm sure you do." She didn't look at him. She kept her arms crossed and watched her oatmeal spin in the microwave with agonizing slowness.

"Ha-hah!" Carnell delighted in her reply, catching none of her barely-veiled sarcasm. That glue-eating monkey actually interpreted her comment as a vote of confidence. It must

be a choice to be that stupid. I pray that it is. If not, we live in a world where the village idiot is allowed to perform surgery.

He stroked the black stubble on his face and tried to look rugged. “Then it’s in your best interest to know me,” he went on. “You’re lonely down here. I’ve diagnosed it. I could get a word out for you, on the outside. If there’s anyone you want to contact, I could make that happen for you.”

She glanced at him for half a second, searing him with ice-blue eyes. It was a heavy glance. There was a lot in it; open annoyance; hidden sadness; a hint of longing; a ray of temptation that she knew better than to indulge. Of course, Carnell saw none of this. To him, the look was a validation of his charms. He thought she was falling for him.

I was blinded as his head tilted back. The happy lights refracted from the mass of gel that plastered his hair down. It was like catching the sun on a car bumper. “There’s someone, isn’t there?” He asked. “There’s someone you miss. Eh? I can see it in your eye.”

Lorelei shrugged, locking eyes to her spinning oatmeal. “Everyone has *someone.*”

Carnell laughed loudly enough to draw attention, though I didn’t know what the joke was. In his chimpanzee humor, he nearly

knocked over his coffee, resting on the counter by his elbow.

Why does he always do that? He sets it down *behind* him while he harasses Lorelei. Typical soft outsider. Everyone in The Underground knows you never turn your back on your coffee. You live long enough in this place and you find that you are not above theft, when in need of precious fuel.

"Well, aren't you glad we're friends, then?" He prodded. "Our little morning chats must take the edge off for you, at least. I bet you're glad to have someone to talk to."

At last the microwave beeped—the music of sweet relief. Lorelei pounced on her oatmeal and set it on the counter. Carnell seized the opportunity to hand her a packet of cinnamon from the tray on the counter, as he always did.

What impeccable gentlemanliness. Who can say chivalry is dead when we have men like Dr. Carnell handing cinnamon to women like Lorelei every day?

"Thank you," she muttered. She tore the packet open and stirred the powder in without looking up. "Actually, I tend to enjoy solitude. I think I'm better at being alone than most people."

That was too subtle a hint for Carnell. “Bahhh, no one *enjoys* it. That’s just what lonely people tell themselves. You know, I could start having lunch down here. You could join me. It’ll grow on you. You want to bet on it? Let’s see how long it takes you to get attached to me.”

At that moment, I had a vision. That really is the word for it. It was like I was actually transported to an alternate reality. I saw, as clearly as saints see gods, myself pouring Carnell’s hot coffee over his head. It was beautiful. A cloud of steam swirled around his hairline as all his gel was incinerated. Trembling hands leaped to his face, his mouth huge with a scream of outrage. He clawed at his sizzling skin, as if that would help him. When it didn’t, he fell gasping against the countertop. His chest heaved. Convulsions spread from his fingers to his knees.

All that was nice. But the best part was the shock that bulged his eyes. He simply couldn’t believe that anyone found him repulsive enough to commit such an act. The thought just wouldn’t compute. He was *Doctor* Carnell! The best of brawn and brain rolled into one. He was the finest human specimen in America, and probably the world. Everyone thought so. How could they not? After all, his mom had been

telling him exactly this for as long as he could remember.

After a minute, his bonobo brain finally registered the thought that I had done it. His dark, rabid eyes flayed me. I laughed. Lorelei laughed too. She turned those blue jewels in her head and gazed at me. I saw admiration. I saw love. *Now* she had a friend to eat lunch with.

Then, reality snapped back. This was, as usual, disappointing. Lorelei simply grabbed her bowl and shuffled off to a table. “I don’t often get out for lunch,” she called curtly over her shoulder.

Carnell batted a hand in the air. “Fine,” he chuckled. “See you tomorrow, Sweet Lorelei!” A smug grin slithered up his jaw as he turned and grabbed his mug. That arrogant smirk never faded as he strutted out of the room. I wanted to take pliers to those glistening teeth of his. He thought she was playing hard-to-get. Her signals of disinterest could not possibly have been clearer, yet he somehow managed to filter them through a lens of self-satisfaction.

Does it take practice to be that dense? Did they make self-delusion an Olympic sport, since I’ve been down here?

When he was gone, I watched Lorelei. She sat and tied her raven-colored hair in a bun.

Even the happy lights couldn't diminish her beauty. Their effect on her pale skin gave her a sheen, a kind of celestial aura. She took her spoon in hands that were delicate, yet strong in their refinement. Nails painted black to match her hair. Her intelligence was so palpable that it seemed to emanate even from those slender fingertips, working the spoon in one hand and her phone in the other. They moved like those of a pianist, no matter how mundane the task. Nothing was second-guessed. She was married to her purpose.

I wonder if she realizes what a gift that is—that ability to sit so quietly with herself. It isn't even an *ability.* It's just human naturalness. She isn't in conflict with her own personhood. What a simple thing to envy. I would kill for it. If I was like her, I'd be able to talk to her.

It should have been easy. She was alone at a table. My mind bubbled with thoughts that reminded me of Dr. Carnell. The likeness was sickening. *She really does look lonely. She wants a friend. She secretly likes to be coveted. You'll flatter her with your attention. Go say something. She'll respect it. It'll make you more of a man. Say something, anything. Do it!*

I snarled at these thoughts. They were futile. I couldn't speak to this woman even if she

did want me to. I could only stand there, paralyzed by her numinous glow.

Someone behind me tapped my shoulder. It was my turn for coffee and I was holding up the line.

I doubted they could detect my rapture, or my ugly, Carnell-esque thoughts. Staring into space with glazed eyes is pretty normal down here, especially in the coffee line. In all likelihood, this person thought nothing of it.

But I despised them for it. I wanted to scream at them, bite them, throw them over a table. What I really did, of course, was nothing. I couldn't act on my feelings. I never can. I didn't even turn to look at this individual. All I could do was crawl over to the coffee machine, like a bug.

A hydraulic claw lifted the saucer. Edwin, my lead tech, slid under this alien spaceship as casually as a car mechanic. It was a few hours after my beatific vision of coffee and Carnell. I stood in Hangar Fourteen, a sprawling laboratory about the size of a football field. The wafting voices of dozens of technicians and the electrical whirring of tools created a hypnotic clamor.

I always find this soothing. Shoes echo from the polished floor in a way that makes you

feel official and important. For some reason, the place always smells like a new phone, fresh out of the box.

We have six saucers here, all of which seem to be different "models." That afternoon I was working on my favorite. I call her Ravana. She's slightly larger than the other five, her surface jet black and perfectly smooth. I have inspected every inch of her, top and bottom, and haven't found a single ridge, dent, or bump. There are no windows or lights. She's a featureless "disc," her curvature bulging toward the center. There's no "window-dome" like you see in a lot of popular "UFO" pictures. She's a twenty-five-foot shadow. To the touch, she feels like stainless steel, only softer somehow. There's a *give* to her, as if whatever metal she's made of is half-jelly. I'm tempted to say it feels like skin. No fingerprints are left behind when you touch her.

The day prior, we had somehow managed to "open" part of her underside. I have no idea how it happened. Edwin was standing under her, hands on his hips, glaring at me with his bug-eyes. He was a short, frail, impatient little man, and I had told him something he didn't want to hear.

"I've spent months staring at this fuckin' blob," he was saying. "I guess that's my job

now. Staring. I don't know anything about this thing I'm staring at. I've learned shit all. Three months, and I'm just as clueless about this thing as the first time I ever walked in here and stared at it."

"Sculptors do the same thing with marble," I replied. That made him angrier.

"Well I'm not fuckin' Michelangelo! I'm not an artist. I'm not here to 'sculpt' this thing, I'm here to work on it. But there's nothing to work on. Maurus, please. I'm going nuts, here. Let me move to number three."

I scoffed.

Saucer three is a mess. It's in pieces, actually, which I suppose is what makes it charming. The rumor is that number three was "shot down." Half of its bits are charred and burned. But at least they're bits. They have a discernible mechanical quality to them. Ravana has no bits, and if you're like most engineers or technicians, that'll make your eyes twitch.

"Sorry," I'd told him. "My task is to get one of these craft running. You're my most skilled tech, and Ravana here is the least… broken."

"Stop calling it that!" He seethed. "We shouldn't be naming these things. This is 'saucer six.' And it's a piece of shit."

I don't know why, but I exploded. My reaction still surprises me. I wasn't angry that he'd admonished me for naming Ravana. I was angry that he'd insulted her.

What makes it weirder is that I'm a highly controlled person. To a fault, in fact. I'm deeply emotional, but I treat my emotions scientifically. I don't *act* on them. I never have. I analyze them. Socially, I'm an observer. My interactions with others are calculated. I don't make the spontaneous emotional *connections* that seem to define the relationships of other people, despite the abundance of emotions that I feel.

Edwin was therefore just as shocked as I was when I spun on him and screamed: "Don't fucking tell me what to call her!" During my outburst, Ravana jolted, and with an abrupt *pop* the metal at the center of her underside… morphed? In less than a second, it slackened and twisted itself into a coil, revealing a soft, spongy orifice that I couldn't help comparing to a womb.

The material is as black as the rest of her surface, but feels like a thick, moist foam. We're certain this must constitute an "entrance" or "door," but we can't get through it. We push against this "uterine wall" and it pushes back. Edwin wouldn't like it, but the conclusion I keep

coming back to is that Ravana will only let us in if she wants to.

Edwin came up with the bright idea that we should “make an incision” and see if we can’t get a sample of the new material. The idea disgusted me. But I couldn’t get in the way.

Ravana is not a corpse on which to perform an autopsy. She has stumped the greatest mechanical engineers in the world for years, possibly decades. Quite by accident, I have achieved the first morsel of progress with her case. An incision does feel like the “logical” next step, given the failure of everything else, and Mr. Gray doesn’t take kindly to missed opportunities.

So the next day, I let Edwin begin his slicing. He took his tools in short, stubby arms and went to work, poking and prodding at Ravana in a tentative way. I watched this and loathed him. I began to think he was almost as bad as Dr. Carnell. What was this pussyfooting for? If he had to cut up Ravana, why did he not just get on with it?

“Yes,” he said, tapping her with his blade. “Material is still vaguely viscous. Warm to the touch.”

All things we had established yesterday. I wasn’t convinced he knew what the word “viscous” meant. He said it because he heard

me say it. He's a technician, not a mortician, and I am telling you, Ravana is not wholly technical.

I watched Edwin fumble around and thought he kind of looked like an alien. An ugly one. I wanted to blast him back into space. I hated him and wondered about my hate. Where was it coming from? Edwin, Dr. Carnell. I'd never hated anyone before. Hate requires closeness, either literal or perceived, and I had never been close to a person.

I'm still not. What is it about this place, this Underground, that has me writing shit lists?

With the point of his knife, Edwin tapped a spot near the middle of Ravana's womb. "The foam seems to be thinnest here. This is where I'll make my incision." Why the fuck was he announcing everything? Why the narration, like it was all new, like *he* was the one making these decisions? This was my project. Edwin wasn't the one on the knife-edge of history. He wasn't the one cracking the uncrackable. He was just the tool in my hand.

Ravana was *mine.*

That's when I became afraid of myself. My fantasies turned to murder. I imagined that Ravana must have had some defense mechanism and that Edwin and his probing knife would fall prey to it. I saw him vaporized

by a red laser. In his last milliseconds, his eyes flashed with horrified *knowing.* There was *regret* in his insectile pupils before they turned to dust. It was delicious. The last thing he ever thought was that carving Ravana like a piece of meat was a mistake.

And then…it happened.

But not exactly as I pictured it. He finally stuck the blade into Ravana and began to cut. The moment he did, he was punished. Only it wasn't a plasma beam. It wasn't some death-ray.

As soon as Edwin made his vaunted incision, Ravana's womb wrinkled like a sponge and belched gallons of some clear, corrosive fluid all over him. The sizzle was deafening—try to imagine the sound of one hundred seventy-five pounds of human meat frying like bacon. Edwin had about a quarter of a second to recoil, his reddening arms thrown skyward. His knife clattered on the floor and began to fuse with it. His face melted into a soupy mush as what was left of his body lunged out from under Ravana, sprung by a final burst of decaying adrenaline. By the time his feet met the ground, they had disintegrated. Mounds of flesh fell off him like a rain of bloody mucus, until the rest of his body hit the floor. It sounded like a giant water balloon exploding. Chunks of melting meat flew

in all directions, but most of him was now a steaming puddle, drawing sickly, blackish-red lines in the cracks between the formerly white floor tiles. My nostrils burned with a stench like body odor, amplified by thousands.

Was it my fault? Did I cause it? Oh *god.* Was it *me?!*

I had to stop writing so I could throw up. I can still hear that *sound,* when his shriveled skull popped against the floor. I'm haunted by daydreams of his eyes turning to liquid. *And in those dying eyes was the regret I had wished to see.*

It's my fault. What have I become? I can't live with this. I *did* it, somehow. What am I? I dreamed of stinkbugs crawling on me. I fantasized about burning someone I hated with hot fluid. I imagined Edwin eliminated by Ravana. *And then it all happened.*

It's not over, either. Last night I had a vivid dream—one of those dreams that feels more real than real life. *I saw a woman with eyes the color of fire. An old man was whimpering at her feet, begging for his life. There was no mercy in her. With a burning sword, she lopped off his head. Out of his open neck flew a stream of diamonds. No blood.*

What the hell is that about? Who is that woman? The Angel of Death? Who's the old

man? Is he who I will become? Someone I know? Someone *else* I'm about to get killed? Am I going to make this angel real and douse the world in her flames? Is she the nuke I'm going to drop on the universe?

All right, I know. I know. I'm being ridiculous. I'm feeding paranoia. Why freak myself out over a dream? These rational thoughts whisper to me. I should listen to them. "Coincidence." Can I save myself with that word? The thing with Carnell and his coffee, the stinkbug on my arm…these really are just coincidences. And Edwin's death was an accident. So what if I played a similar scene in my head beforehand? I had dark thoughts and then dark things happened. Therapy would be a good idea, but it wasn't my fault. I didn't *do* anything.

I'd love to believe that. Maybe I need to believe it. And maybe I could have believed it, if it weren't for what happened after.

The hangar was totally silent. All the workers were stunned by morbid fascination, staring at the puddle of still-bubbling filth that had once been Edwin.

And then, a low buzz, like the sound of a handheld fan, or a toy airplane. A small blur darted through the air—left, right, then straight down into the mess. A stinkbug landed in the

sizzling puddle. It took a few curious steps and wiggled its antennae.

You want to know about my relationship with my family? I burned my dad and brothers to death when I was sixteen. Blew up our house. What would make a girl do that? Figure it out. I don't have to spell shit out.

I got away with it too. They blamed it on a gas leak. Mom collected insurance and split it with me.

So. Yeah. I'm qualified. That's just the first item on my resume.

-**From Session 1 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae**

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 01

Jared Nauls eats a lot of leftovers.

He gets home around 5:30. I poisoned his dinner at 5:00. Went into a closet upstairs and waited. It was nostalgic. Felt like being a kid again, hiding in a small dark space. Always trying to find a slightly less awkward sitting position. Getting cramped and sore anyway. Good times.

I heard the front door open and got my phone out. Opened our surveillance app.

We've had cameras on him for weeks. I like to watch him. Guy walks like a tired elephant. Like he's pulling a sled with sixty years of bullshit tied on.

He went into the kitchen and nuked his dinner. Even the microwave sounded exhausted. Creaky.

Jared finished eating at 5:58. At 6:07 he waddled into the living room. Old wooden floor boards whined about it. Puffs of dust kicked up as he walked. He collapsed on the couch and made a whale noise. What a noise. I felt like I got ten years older when I heard it.

He took a minute to catch his breath. Ran his hands through what wisps of white hair he

had left. He kept smacking his lips every ten seconds. Gross. Then he pulled his phone out and squinted at it.

I love this part.

Like every night, he dialed his son first. Like every night, he got no answer. Next, he annoyed his daughter. I started counting. Usually, she gave him about two minutes.

"Hi honey," he said. Every time he paused he smacked his lips. Nasty. Can't imagine having that sound in my ear. I wouldn't take his calls either. "Oh, okay," he went on. "I won't keep you. But listen, I've really got something to…I wanna say it. To you and your brother. I know I've…yeah…but look, I'm trying to make it right and…yeah, but listen…well, I call 'cause I got something to say! I know he doesn't wanna talk, but…honey…honey, talk to him for me. Would ya? I'm about to do something here. I'm working with some journalists and then I'm gonna…yup…and after that I'll be done forever. Done! And I wanna see ya…I know…I wanna make up for that. Can you please just…honey…okay…all right…yup, tell them their grandpa loves…ah."

He dropped his phone on the cushion next to him and leaned back and made another whale noise. I counted seventy-eight seconds before she hung up.

Jared keeps a red photo album under one of his throw pillows. Deformed looking thing, patches of beige all over the cover where the leather flaked off. Every night he pulls it out and tortures himself with it. I want to know what's in it. Our cameras aren't positioned well enough for me to see.

When I saw him pull it out, I pocketed my phone and left the closet. Went downstairs silently and came out behind his couch. Saw the back of his head peeking over the cushions with all its liver spots. Every few seconds he'd giggle or sniffle. Or smack his damn lips.

I got around the couch and stood in front of him. Wasn't even eight feet away. Next to me was a huge bookshelf filled with elegant glassware that I doubted he'd bought. Vases, plates, fancy wine glasses, etc. I figured it was old shit nobody wanted and in the wreckage of divorce it got dumped on him. Or maybe they were another nostalgic thing he liked to punish himself by keeping.

It took him a minute to notice me. His face was buried in his pictures. A smell like dog breath came off him. I felt bad for his couch.

When he finally looked up there was a tiny flash of hope in his brown, glossy cow eyes. It was barely there. Gone by the time he blinked. But I caught it. His knee-jerk hope was that I

was someone else. When he realized who I wasn't, his brow furrowed and his lips smacked with extra juiciness. He twitched his head once, like he thought I was a mirage he could shake off. The photo album was still clutched in his pudgy fingers.

"Who the hell are you?" He finally managed.

I stood with my hands in my pockets and stared at him. "Do you really not know?"

He raised his thumbs and wiped away tears. The photo album plopped into his lap. "Know, shit! How did you get in my house?"

"I'm with Black Book, Mr. Nauls."

He froze. His thumbs floated by his eyes. He looked like a fat, scared rabbit. After a second he tried to laugh it off. "Funny prank. Are you someone's daughter? Did Mitchell put you up to this? Tell that incontinent fuck—"

"I don't know any Mitchell. I'm here on business."

He slapped his knees and cocked his head. Now he looked like a dog. "*Business?* The hell kind of business? You mention Black Book and then talk *business.* You're a bit young for the Black Book business, aren't you? A bit pretty?"

I pointed at his album and crossed my arms. "Tell me about that."

An outraged lip-smack. He hugged the album to his chest. “Tell you what? The fuck is this? Who are you, really?”

“You’re planning to leak some information to the press, aren’t you?”

He blinked. Now he was a fish, bobbing his mouth and finding no words. He couldn’t even manage a lip-smack.

I laughed. “If you think you could do that without us knowing, you really don’t understand who we are.”

He tried to laugh again. “I’d say it’s you who doesn’t understand, young lady. You don’t know what you’re into. You say you’re with Black Book. And what did they tell you? I bet you don’t even know what I’m *alleged* to be leaking. Do you? You don’t even know if I’m guilty.”

“I don’t need to know. It’s not part of my job.”

He huffed a few times and darted his head back and forth. “Then what is? Why are you standing there like that? Don’t you ever move? How can you stand there, an intruder in a man’s house, and be so *still*?”

I smiled. “I poisoned you, Mr. Nauls. In about five minutes, your heart is going to stop. If you’re calm, you might have ten.”

"Hah! Horse's ass. You're just here to say that. Intimidate me. You wanna scare me out of talking. I feel fine. I don't feel any poison."

"And you won't. Not until the end. It all hits at once. It's a brand new cocktail, very cutting-edge. There'll be no evidence of foul play."

Sweat shined on his forehead. "Then what are you doing here for? Eh? The fuck are you standing there talking to me for if you poisoned me? You and those creepy devil eyes of yours. You know your eyes are almost orange? Weirdo…hello? You still haven't moved. Creepy skank. I got a phone here and I could call the cops."

"Try it if you want. The adrenaline will just kill you faster."

He cackled like a maniac. "You're full of shit. You're up to your ears in bullshit. Who sent you here, really?"

I pulled a small yellow pill out of my pocket. "I have the antidote right here. Maybe I'll give it to you. But first you have to tell me about your album there."

"*Hahhh.*" He tried to sound scornful. But he hugged his album tighter. "That's it? You'll just *give* me the cure in exchange for…what? Family gossip? If you're really with Black Book, you know they'd never let me go. They're

always watching. They're watching *you.* They'd punish you for letting me go and then they'd off me anyway."

I nodded. "All true. But this way you'd have a chance to run. Wouldn't you rather take the chance? Go out with a bang. Go out with adventure, not sniveling here in your living room. Maybe you could run to your daughter. Maybe she'd help you. Maybe this is just the crisis you two need to reconnect."

His face darkened. His wheezing breaths went quiet. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Clock's ticking, Nauls." I rolled the antidote in my fingers. "Two minutes now. Make your choice."

"Fuck your choice!" Spit dangled from his chin. "Get the hell out. Get the fuck out of my house, bitch! You hear me?"

"All you have to do is tell me what you're looking at."

"GET THE FUCK OUT!"

"Tell me what it means to you."

"AHHH!!" Jared shot up from his couch with surprising speed, reaching out to throttle me. I didn't even move—he was dead as soon as he stood up. His precious album flew out of his arms and landed at my feet. His eyes rolled back into his skull and his limp body sailed straight into his old lady bookshelf. Sounded

like a gunshot when he hit. The middle shelves snapped from the impact and threw off their glassware. Jared bobbed down to the floor and took the lower shelves with him, and the overall jostling sent the valuables on the upper shelves raining in a steady stream behind the rest, so for a few beautiful seconds there was a fountain of glistening shards thrown up in front of me. Reminded me of a spray of diamonds.

Soon the house was quiet. I bent and wiped a few gems of glass off his album. Tucked it under my arm and patted Jared's big, dead belly. "It's been a pleasure, Mr. Nauls."

I stepped over the corpse of Jared Nauls and carried his heart out the front door.

When I was twelve, I won a science fair for building a cheap solar engine that could power a car. I attracted quite a bit of attention. I had my "fifteen minutes of fame" and hated every one of them. I don't like attention. I don't like people prying into my psyche. We could have gotten rich though, and I didn't hate that.

But since I was a minor, I needed a parent to sign the patent with me. Mom wouldn't do it. She claimed it was to protect me. Founding a renewable energy business was too much pressure for a twelve-year-old. She was probably right about that.

But I knew my mother by then. I knew the way she disguised her real emotions with rationality. I was a "gifted" child and she was jealous.

-From Session 2 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 02

There was something weird about Bohm's coffee. It tasted fine.

Actually, it tasted awful. But all coffee tastes awful, and his tasted like normal coffee. My addiction to coffee is borne of necessity, not enjoyment. I hate it. But you can't be sane in The Underground without it, much less after watching your coworker disintegrated alive by a UFO.

So when I walked into Bohm's lab to discuss his findings about Ravana's mysterious acid, I accepted his offer of coffee the way you accept water in a desert. Bohm's black eyes gleamed with amusement as I guzzled it. Hence my suspicion. I didn't care, though. I wrote it off as a typical Bohm-ism.

Looking back, I think I needed his hijinks as much as the coffee. Bohm is *perpetually* amused. It's his default setting. But you feel an awe around him—an aura of warmth and wisdom. He may be the sanest person I know, which is a crazy thing to say about anybody down here. In a place like this, there can be no higher praise.

When I finished pouring his coffee down my throat, he put a fist under his thick gray wizard beard and rested his chin on it. “You liked that, didn’t you?”

I handed him back his mug. “Not really.”

He laughed and glided away, through a maze of beakers and test tubes. Today he was wearing a brown robe, like a monk. It fluttered along behind his restless legs. I paced a rare line of empty space and kept my arms at my sides, terrified I’d spill something and turn into a mutant.

This is the most stereotypical “laboratory” in all of The Underground. It’s filled with chrome machines that faintly hum. Vials of colorful chemicals glitter everywhere. I have no idea what any of these things are or do. The floor and walls are blinding white.

Bohm poked his head through a nook between two curly tubes. “How did it taste? How does it feel in your stomach?”

I looked at him. The smooth dark skin on his bald head was soothing, given the brightness of everything else. The sly grin growing on his face was less pleasant.

“I don’t know, like coffee.” I narrowed my eyes. “Why? What are you doing? I’ve told you, I will not be a human experiment.”

He giggled mysteriously and vanished into his forest of silver and glass. His rich baritone wafted out of the ether like a drunk Roman god. “The whole world is an experiment, my dear Maurus! What are any of us but chemicals in a beaker?”

“I’m getting a lawyer,” I called back.

Another of his Buddha-laughs. He directed me through his maze to a less cluttered sector of his lab. I found him sitting in front of a computer screen on a clean black countertop, a small glass vial and a mug of his own coffee next to him. He spun in his chair and studied me, excited like a child.

“So,” he rumbled. “What can I do for you?”

I blinked. “What do you mean, what can you do? Did you analyze the acid?”

“Ah,” he said, his words broken by giggles. “Right. That.”

For the first time in my life, I was angry at him. “What exactly is funny? A man is *dead* because of this shit, Bohm. One of my employees!”

His hand swayed in front of his face, like algae under waves. “That’s not the funny thing,” he croaked.

“Then what is?”

He cleared his throat. “Well. Uh. You asked me to analyze the corrosive fluid you discovered.”

“Yes,” I simmered. “And did you?”

“Uh-huh.”

Silence. I could hear something bubbling, somewhere. I threw my arms up. “*And?!*”

“You just drank it.”

My brain stopped. My mind had nothing in it.

I am a compulsive and incessant thinker, so this was no small event. Only Bohm can do that to me. This wasn’t the first time he had. It seems to be the goal of all his esoteric humor.

Seeing it happen, he convulsed with laughter. I sat in a stool next to the counter and waited for him to return to his senses.

“Ahh,” he sighed, rubbing at his clenched gut. “Phew. All right. Come here, look.” I inched my stool toward him, feeling like a pranked little brother. He pointed to his vial. It was filled with a clear liquid. “This is the acid from your saucer. It continued to drip from the craft for several minutes after your…incident. As you can see, it doesn’t corrode this kind of fiberglass. That’ll be very relevant in a minute. Remember it. Now! Watch.” Like a magic trick, he pulled a handful of creamer cups from the folds of his robe. He

peeled them open and paused, raising an eyebrow at me. “Focus. Watch the acid.”

Bohm poured all the cream into his coffee. As he began to stir it, a faint mist appeared in the acid. It quickly thickened and became a swirling puff of white, like milk dropped into water. Within half a minute, all the liquid in the vial was pure white.

I squinted at it. Bohm growled with satisfaction. He gave me a few seconds to register what I’d seen, then opened the vial and poured the contents in his coffee. I shot out of my stool, expecting the coffee to boil over with some acidic foam, but it didn’t.

Bohm gave the coffee another casual stir and flashed me an evil grin. Just as I realized what he was about to do, he raised the mug to his lips and drank.

Panic punched me in the kidneys. It occurred to me that I should *do* something. I couldn’t allow this friend of mine to *ingest acid.* But I did nothing. I simply observed, as always. My muscles were on fire. My bones screamed at me to jump on him; tackle him; push my fingers down his throat and make him vomit. This was all common sense to my body. It was instinct. But I couldn’t obey my instincts. I could only watch them. I stood there at war with myself and watched Bohm lean back with a

happy sigh, expecting to witness some carnival of gore. My mind only analyzed these raging feelings. My brain didn't move my burning muscles, no matter how much they begged. I hated myself.

Bohm looked at me and smiled. He didn't see the storm of self-loathing blowing behind my eyes. I seemed to be merely dumbfounded.

"Do you get it?" He asked.

I gulped down razor blades. But Bohm clearly hadn't detonated, so I began to unclench—slowly. "Get?" I squeaked. I sounded like a mouse. "What is there to get? I get nothing."

Bohm laughed and motioned to my stool. "Come on, come on. You can sit down again, I promise. There's no danger." I sat and he put on a pair of glasses and clicked around on his computer. Jagged, corkscrewing molecules danced on the screen in vibrant colors, accompanied by chemical information that I was too shaken to find interesting.

"Right." Bohm pointed at them. "There's your acid. See?"

I nodded. I didn't "see," but I didn't feel like protesting.

He clicked and a different molecule appeared. This one was gentler, simpler looking. Somehow more benign. "And this," Bohm continued, "is coffee creamer. Right?"

I shrugged. “Right.”

“No!” He spun in his stool and wagged a finger in my face. “Wrong. This, too, is your acid.”

“But you just said it was coffee creamer.”

“It is.”

I ran my hands over my face. “Bohm, I’m tired. And currently recovering from a heart attack, courtesy of you. I can’t solve your riddles today.”

“Really? Nothing?” He jumped up. His own stool toppled over, though he didn’t seem to notice. “You *must* be tired. You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met, but you’re missing the obvious. It’s flying right over your head.” He made an airplane with his hand and sailed it over me.

I smiled. “You’re going to have to spell this one out for me. Just give me this one.”

“Ah!” Bohm took the empty vial and held it in front of me. It was still stained with foggy white residue. “Maurus, look. Your acid began as just that. An extremely aggressive corrosive. But it *became* coffee creamer. On the molecular level, it was *indistinguishable* from cream.”

I squinted at the vial again. My hand rose halfway from the table to grab it, but I decided not to. “You mean when you stirred your cream into your coffee?”

"*Yes.*" Bohm pretended to poke me in the eye with the vial. "Now you're awake." He waved his arms as he spoke, becoming more and more animated. "I still don't know exactly how. But in some way, the proximity to the cream, and my act of stirring the cream, literally changed this acid into cream. And it's worked with other substances as well. This is the best new toy I've ever gotten, man. Santa never brought me anything more fun than your acid. I've changed it into coffee itself. I've changed it into water. I've changed it into honey, I've changed it into *mercury.* What we have here is a perfectly mutable fluid. The liquid in your craft, this black saucer you like so much…this fluid is somehow *programmable.* It can be whatever the saucer needs it to be."

I almost choked. "It *was* a defense mechanism!"

Bohm set the vial down and cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Well, that was my suspicion. The acid was a defense mechanism. We started cutting into Ravana's…well, uh, underside, and it just came pouring out. I knew it was a mistake. I *knew* we shouldn't have tried to force her open."

Bohm nodded, eyeing me curiously. I said too much. My words had a hint of crazy to

them, like a sauce with just a “little kick” of spice. Most wouldn’t have noticed—most are too preoccupied with their own neuroses, their own miniature insanities.

But Bohm’s perception isn’t so clouded. He sees things as they are, the bastard.

He looked at me now with a note of concern, but was tactful enough not to say anything about it.

I changed tack and expressed another thought that I felt was more rational. “But why was the stinkbug not harmed by the acid, then? It dissolved Edwin instantly, but the stinkbug was unaffected by it.”

“Stinkbug, you say?” He looked at me again.

Now I was nervous. “No one told you about the stinkbug?”

“No, I haven’t heard about this.” He watched me with added concentration.

“It flew right down after it all happened. After Edwin was…gone. This god damn stinkbug flew down and landed right in the mess of him. I can’t believe no one mentioned this to you. Everyone in the hangar saw it. After a few minutes, it flew away, like it was nothing. The acid meant nothing to it.”

He studied me another moment, then shrugged. “Hm. Well, that gives me one idea, but it’s a bit unsettling.”

“What’s that?”

He sighed. “Well. I’ll have to look into it, but it could be that the acid was calibrated to affect only human bio-matter. I’m told there is no sign of damage to the flooring where it happened, and our hazmat crew was able to clean the mess with a simple mop. We didn’t need fancy vials after all. Perhaps we could have collected the acid in paper cups. Perhaps we could have played beer pong with it.”

I ignored the return of his jokes. “But what about the knife?”

“Mmm.” He nodded and fluffed out his beard with the backs of his hands. “The knife that is now the floor.”

“Correct. Edwin’s knife fused with the floor. His knife isn’t organic.”

“But it had organic material all over it. Oil from Edwin’s skin, his skin cells, his sweat. The knife was affected for the same reason Edwin’s clothes were affected. They were sufficiently a part of him.”

I shuddered. “God. Is that possible? What sort of acid could be inert against all but human material?”

He shrugged. “Maybe it isn’t just *human* material. Maybe this acid is calibrated for use against all primates. Or maybe all mammals. Maybe it’s just inert against insects, like your stinkbug. Maybe the original occupants of the craft were insectile in nature. Maybe they had mammalian enemies on their home world. Who knows? I’ll have to run some more tests. If you encounter any more of this stuff, bring it to me at once. If you survive, that is.”

That night, I went to see Ravana. Alone. Everyone was off-duty and Hangar Fourteen was empty.

It was an urge that I couldn’t resist and didn’t understand. I was *compelled.* I kept telling myself that I “needed answers” from her, as if she could give any. I was angry about Edwin’s death and blamed her for it. That was probably just a rationalization, though. More likely, I was trying to deflect my horrifying sense of cosmic responsibility for what happened, and Ravana was my scapegoat.

Well, let’s not go down that rabbit hole.

The point is, I knew that what I was doing was ridiculous. I’ve already mentioned my compulsive levels of self-control. It’s not like me to go tromping through the night in service of a higher principle.

Read: I didn't *want* to see Ravana. She was calling me.

The hangar doors are dramatic, humongous chrome monoliths. You feel small and unimportant looking up at them. It's like standing on the steps of some massive futuristic cathedral.

They deemed me worthy and accepted my keycard—as lead engineer, I alone have twenty-four hour access—and rumbled open. Only a few backup lights flickered on, so the hangar was dimmer than usual, lit like pale orange dusk. My echoing footsteps were deafening in the spacious silence.

Ravana waited on the other side of the cavern, like an empress. She reminded me of the maw of some inter-dimensional abyss. I felt like I could jump into the shadow of her and fall forever into the void.

I hesitated as I reached her, half-afraid that would actually happen. I stared into her and saw only black. There wasn't the vaguest reflection to look back at me. There was only her. My arms and legs trembled. I didn't know whether to cry or scream. "Why…?" I whimpered.

I shook my head and sniveled. I was helpless in front of her. I wondered if she had

summoned me for just that purpose. To be utterly powerless in her presence. To *feel* that.

My rage at that thought was like a flood. I would not bear the indignity. Before I knew what I was doing, I pounded her with my fists. “What did you make me *do?!*”

Time warped around that last word. All the fury coiled inside me shot to my head. It was electricity in my brain, and in that lightning between the synapses, I felt her. I *felt* Ravana, for a second, in my head.

At the same time, a deep buzz filled the hangar, and Ravana rose. The steel claws that held her screeched in protest as they strained to hold her in place. Struggling against them, Ravana tilted upward and revealed her underside. Her womb opened and I gasped as a brilliant white light shined from it. The aperture was just wide enough to squeeze me in, and the light was pulling me toward it.

I staggered back. I didn’t want to go in. I wasn’t ready. But the light was magnetic. Even pleasant. It was warm like sunlight, and it had been so long since I’d seen the sun…

I raised an arm to block it and forced myself backward. There was no sound except for the buzz shaking the walls. It sounded like a gigantic swarm of bees. It was a cosmic noise—the voice of a goddess, calling out to me from

every atom in the air and the earth. I couldn't take it all. Between that and the light, my better judgement was evaporating. Soon, I would let her take me.

I twisted and fell, landed hard on my knees. The pain was actually helpful. It shook me out of hypnosis.

I ran then, while I could. I sprinted for those godly doors. Ravana floated behind me, centered the light on my back. It was *following* me. I prayed the claws would hold, that they'd keep her in place. She couldn't follow me out of the hangar. There was no way she could do that. I just had to reach the exit. It was thirty feet away. Twenty. All the way, I felt the soft brush of the light on my neck. Like the caress of a lover. It was more tempting than anything I'd ever felt. What would it have been like to let that caring touch envelope me? To truly let it *have* me?

But I couldn't. What would it mean? What awaited me in that womb? What sort of fetus would I become in there?

The exit stretched away like a bad dream. I ran for an hour, even though it couldn't have been more than ten seconds. My lungs were on fire. I realized I was hyperventilating. My legs were gelatinous. Was I melting, like Edwin? The thought of melting was indescribably pleasant. I could disintegrate and

be one with the light. It would absorb me, and I'd be with her. Ravana would have me. I would never be alone again.

When I finally made it out, the return to normal time was like cold water to the face. Frantically, I swiped my card to close the hangar. The giant doors to the underworld cut into Ravana's spotlight and slowly snuffed it out. As it became a sliver, a needle of thought stabbed into my mind. It was foreign, unbidden. It didn't make sense.

Even now, I can't say for sure whether it was drudged up from my own depths—so strange and unlike me that I didn't recognize it as my own—or if it really could have come from *her.*

The doors boomed shut. The light was gone at last. I collapsed against the doors and tried to breathe through what felt like glass shards in my windpipe. Sweat poured off me.

Ravana and her blazing, seductive womb were locked inside. That thought remained though—alien, but blindingly real. It was a single sentence, spoken in the regal voice of a demoness: *Now, you can poison him.*

After I killed my family I got as many medical details as I could and shared them with Dolion. That's your codename for my husband, right? I described the charred state of my father's corpse. I told Dolion that death probably wasn't instantaneous. My father and brothers probably knew and felt what was happening to them. I told Dolion it was all because of me.
Then he bent me over the kitchen table and fucked me. Most mind-shattering orgasm I've ever had.

-From Session 2 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 02

When I got in the car my left hand was on Dolion's crotch. In my right was the prized photo album of Jared Nauls. Dolion's left hand was on the wheel. His right was in my hair.

He eyed me as the car began to move. "What'cha got there?" He asked.

I rubbed him, felt him getting harder. "Drive faster and I'll tell you."

As soon as we were home, both his hands were on my tits. I dropped the album on an end table and knocked over a lamp. Dolion's lips brushed my throat so lightly I could barely feel them. That turned me feral. I moaned as he pulled my shirt off.

He whispered in my ear. "So what is it?"

I held the back of his head. Shaved hair prickled my fingertips. "Must be family shit…he looked at it every night…called his kids first… mmm…he died holding it."

One rough hand went down my pants. "How'd he go?"

I closed my eyes, savored his breath on my neck, his fingers inside me. "I was the last thing he saw. He knew I did it."

Dolion growled and threw me on the couch.

I came so hard I almost passed out. When I got back to Earth, Dolion and I looked at the photo album together.

It was mostly what I expected. Corny, stupid family pictures. They were all old. Jared was younger in them. Thinner. Almost handsome, but his hairline was already receding. There were birthdays with two cutesy kids, presents under Christmas trees, dumb beaming children, dumber grinning adults. The Nauls' were a happy family then. They were picturesque. Dolion and I laughed at our disgust of the whole thing.

The pictures stopped suddenly. They were endless until the kids were, like, eight and ten. Only one picture after that. Jared was standing next to his daughter in it. She was in a gown and cap. Jared had his arm around her. Most awkward thing I ever saw. There was so much distance between them he could barely make the pose. Arm stretched out like a tape measure. Daughter was frowning. Miserable.

That was it. That was what I was looking for. It was the guilt in his eyes. The futile hope that this one gesture would make up for all his

abandonment. He made it to her graduation. So he was father of the year.

I pulled out the picture and closed the album and put them both on the end table.

“Ahh,” Dolion sighed. “What a pansy fuck.”

I ran my finger down his chest, traced lines of sculpted muscle. “Who’s next for you again?”

“Eh.” He twisted his mouth up and thought. “Some twat from the Chair Force. Colonel, I think. Saw something he shouldn’t have.”

I rubbed his nipple with the tip of my finger. “Where at?”

His voice got sleepier. “Texas someplace.”

I looked at my husband’s face. Looked like a giant killer baby. Smooth skin. No hair, no beard, chubby cheeks. Wondered why he shaved everything. Apartment was dark. Soft TV light pulsed. Made his closed eyelids dance without moving.

“A colonel might have some fight in him,” I said.

A groggy laugh. “I said he was Chair Force, baby.”

“*Hey.*” I climbed on top of him, guided his flaccidity into me. “Don’t get all bedtime on me.

I'm not done with you." He groaned and sat up. Our tongues played. His thumbs teased my nipples. "Now," I whispered between kisses. "What are you gonna do when you find him?"

He got hard quick, filled me up. "I'm gonna blow his head off."

He gave me a hard thrust. I gasped.

Dolion was snoring on the couch before long. I got up and brought Jared's pictures to our bedroom. On the way in, I passed the mirror and stopped.

Seeing the reflection of your naked body is different. You see yourself in the shower every day, but it's so familiar you don't really see it.

I turned the light on and looked closer. Not what I expected. Still a beautiful body. Art-worthy, even. Twenty-five years old. Fully blossomed into womanhood, but still young and fertile. Unique amber coloring to the eyes. Copper hair coming down just beneath the chin. Toned and fit, but not overtly muscular. Not too tall, not too short. Perky, mid-sized breasts. A nice plump ass, but not overbearing. This was a peak. I'd never be more coveted.

But there was something about me. I seemed older than I should have. Most wouldn't notice. Would some lover, some horny person, even see the white scars on my thighs? Would

they think anything of them if they did? Would they bother studying the invisible weight that drew my eyes down at the corners?

Fuck. There was no little girl left in those eyes. No innocence. No *potential.* They were the eyes of an old woman screaming on her deathbed.

I turned away, disgusted. Moved to the bookshelves that lined the far wall. They didn't have any books. They were filled with countless personal trinkets. There was a model airplane—some dogfighter from World War II. It was a family heirloom, passed down from a veteran to his son, and to his son after that. Somehow, the last son found himself on Black Book's bad side. I found him in Indiana, watched him. Saw how he cherished that little plane. I shot him twice between the eyes and took it.

There was jewelry. Lots of rings. One enormous diamond from a woman Dolion killed in London. It could be worth millions. But Dolion brought it back for me. Families love their inherited jewels.

I set Jared's photo album on a lower shelf, between an antique dagger and a knitted baby sock. But his last picture, the one from graduation…that I'd have to frame. I put it on one of the higher shelves for now, around eye level. Leaned it up against some fancy dinner

plate that came from a data analyst I killed in Nevada.

I stepped back and admired my newest trophy. Here was my fountain of youth. My rejuvenating shrine. With this new soul added to my collection, I felt that little girl who had drowned behind my eyes rise from the dead.

Shortly after my flirtation with fame, my solar engine was stolen. My older brother and I came home from school and found the house broken into. Nothing else was missing.
I was naturally upset. Mom came home from work and found me crying. She went through the motions of consolation. I got a few pats on the back and some general murmurs of sympathy.
My brother didn't pretend to care. He told me the engine sucked anyway. He said I should grow up and stop playing with toys. My engine was just a sophisticated toy.
Mom told him to stop and be nice. But she laughed as she did it.

-From Session 3 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 03

"Are you sorry for what happened, Mr. Maurus?"

"I take full responsibility, sir."

"That is not what I asked."

I squirmed in my chair. Mr. Gray's black eyes pierced me from behind his desk. Eyes never get that black. The irises were almost darker than the pupils, somehow. Being questioned by him was a biblical experience. Not in a good way.

When Mr. Gray looks at you, you feel *exposed,* as any good sinner does under the gaze of the almighty Father. No one in The Underground believes he is fully human. His features are symmetrical in a way that makes it hard to determine his ethnicity. His skin tone is neither light nor dark. It's like he's a perfect amalgamation of every ethnic group on planet Earth. His head is bald. The gray hairs in his beard are so well-groomed that not a single one seems out of place.

And now I was in his lair—excuse me—his office. I'd been *summoned* by him. Mr. Gray never summons anyone. I was sure I was about to be sacrificed.

The place was huge and futuristic. There didn't seem to be separate objects in this room. His desk, the furniture, transparent bookshelves and end tables, all looked like they'd *grown* out of the floor. No sharp edges; all rounded corners. Everything was grayish, silver, black. It could have been the inside of a saucer. The walls had a way of throwing the echoes of our voices back down our throats.

I choked on my own breath, baffled by his question and terrified of answering it badly. Mr. Gray was patient. His hands rose slowly, even elegantly, like surgical instruments, and adjusted his suit. It was too perfect a suit. Black jacket, black tie, white undershirt. It looked unnatural, like someone had photoshopped it onto him. Though, I couldn't imagine what sort of clothing *would* look natural on this man.

"I…" I finally coughed. "Yes. Very much."

"I don't believe you need be," he said. His voice was rich and airy, like some mythical serpent-god.

I caught myself shrinking in my chair and straightened, hoping he hadn't noticed. "I shouldn't have authorized those incisions. Not like that. It was careless. I exposed one of my technicians to unnecessary risk."

Mr. Gray joined his fingertips beneath his chin. “You found what happened to him disturbing?”

“Oh yes. Of course.” I was assailed by mental images of Edwin’s melting eyes.

“Why?”

I couldn’t answer. What did he mean, ‘Why?’

After a minute of quiet, he said: “So it was these unpleasant feelings that drove you back into Hangar Fourteen the next night?”

My own fingertips danced together, in a frantic way. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“What did you hope to gain?”

Another unanswerable question. I had no idea, and still don’t. How can you give a reason for unreasonable actions?

“It was…” I sighed. “It was just an impulse, sir. I had no plan. I just wanted to learn something, I suppose. Or try to.”

“Hmm.” He finally moved somewhat, lowering his hands to the desktop. “So you cannot account for the success that followed?”

“I’m sorry, sir? Success?”

His hands spread apart. “You activated saucer six. No one has ever activated saucer six.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe I did.”

"In your report you stated that saucer six 'achieved a propulsive state and emitted light.' Ergo, it was activated."

"Saucer *six,*" I echoed, not daring to say 'Ravana' in front of Mr. Gray, "was activated, but not by me. I didn't do anything."

He leaned back. His face brightened somewhat. It could have been the beginning of a smile. Was Mr. Gray capable of smiling? I doubted it.

"What are your ambitions, Mr. Maurus?" He asked.

Finally, a normal question. Sort of. But why ask it? I suspected he already knew the answer, maybe better than I did.

I squeaked something vague about "machines."

He nodded twice, serenely, like a monk. "You do have a prodigious aptitude for machines. A doctorate in aeronautical engineering by age twenty-one, and from no less a place than the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After that, ten years spent revolutionizing the aerospace industry with designs so sophisticated that you came to be known as a 'miracle worker.' You've a talent like no other. Perhaps a generational talent."

Overwhelmed, I managed some approximation of thanks. I'd never heard of Mr.

Gray praising anyone. It was unnerving. There had to be some kind of motive.

He leaned forward. All his words were slow and deliberate. He was impossibly subdued. I realized he was the most confident person I'd ever met. There wasn't a single particle of self-consciousness in him. There was only analysis. And judgement.

"How would you describe your relationship to the work you do here?"

I scratched my beard. "My relationship, sir?"

"Would you say you find your work here fulfilling?"

"Well, um." I looked down at the silver floor. There weren't any lines or patterns in it. It was just a smooth, silver sheet. But it wasn't drab, despite its plainness. It meshed with the sheen of the rest of the office. It had a striking effect. A real aesthetic purpose.

What kind of man designs an office like that? I assume Mr. Gray designed it.

"It's, uh," I continued, "challenging at times. But that can be a good thing."

"Indeed." He rubbed his chin in a display of thoughtfulness. "Does the work intrigue you?"

"In what way, sir?"

"In regards to its nature. Do you wonder about the grander purpose of it?"

Was he testing me? We're generally discouraged from wondering about such things down here. And from wondering in general. I had wondered plenty. But could I really admit to it? That would depend on why he was asking, which was impossible to figure out.

I realized I was stammering, but hadn't said anything.

"I imagine you must have certain curiosities," he said. "All do who come to this place, this land of dreams."

Why did he talk like that? People don't talk like that. He mentioned dreams and was speaking like a dream character. I wondered—not for the first time, but more acutely than ever—if all these two years I've spent in The Underground have *been* a dream. His words came dangerously close to confirming it.

"Well," I shrugged, trying to be casual. "As you say, everyone does."

"Have you any theories? To what ideas have your curiosities led you? What do you suppose is the purpose of all the work we at M-Facility are involved in?"

I almost forgot what "M-Facility" was. That's the "official" name for this base we all lovingly refer to as The Underground. I've gotten

so used to the nickname. M-Facility (no one knows what the "M" stands for) is run by DAS-5, the agency we call Black Book. Mr. Gray is the director of DAS-5. There's another thing we all secretly wonder about—the extent of the agency's reach, their origins, their other operations. They're completely black budget, hence the Black Book moniker. Off the government books. They could be running dozens of M-Facilities for all we know, each one weirder and more coffee-addicted than the last.

I cleared my throat. "Well. I've spent all my time here attempting to reverse-engineer these saucers—excuse me—these 'foreign aircraft' in Hangar Fourteen."

Mr. Gray nodded once.

I sat on my hands and tried to cover up my fidgeting. "As you pointed out, I am no stranger to aeronautics. I know what human aircraft can do and what they can't. I myself have pushed the boundaries of what human aircraft can do. I have changed that landscape. Rebuilt it. I won't pretend to false modesty in that regard.

"And yet…these saucers have totally stumped me. *They* are the miracles, sir, not my paltry designs. I can't even scratch the surface of technology like this. Whatever could be said about my talents doesn't matter. Compared to

this, I'm a toddler building sandcastles. These saucers are the pyramids of Giza. I know they cannot have been built by human beings. And knowledge like that does indeed stimulate curiosity."

Mr. Gray raised an eyebrow. "And?"

I shrugged and looked down at my lap.

"There is no need to be sheepish, Mr. Maurus. You wouldn't be human if you weren't curious. Don't you wonder where these craft have come from?"

"Of course. But I can only speculate."

Slowly, he ran his fingers along the edges of his tie. "What if you didn't have to speculate?"

I looked up at him. At his forehead. I didn't want to meet those eyes. "Sir?"

"Humor me," he hummed. "If you could, wouldn't you like to meet the designers of these saucers, as you call them? Even if only professionally. Wouldn't you like to talk shop?"

Oddly, the thought annoyed me. Disgusted me, even. "I don't know what shop there would be to talk. Would you try to talk shop with a goldfish? This is the kind of gap of intelligence we're talking about, here. Perhaps I'm a genius among men. But whatever could have designed these saucers must be on an

entirely different plane. I'm a gnat in comparison."

Mr. Gray pursed his lips, still rubbing his tie. "And yet, you have succeeded where all others have failed. You got one of the craft running."

I surprised myself by getting defensive. "I don't even know how I did it! It was blind, stupid luck. Mr. Gray, you really should dismiss me. I've spent two years down here fumbling around, doing ultimately nothing. I am a waste of your budget. This recent incident with saucer six may look like success, but it wasn't. I didn't *do* anything."

A tiny grin tugged his lips. It was a *knowing* grin. Seeing it, I realized why I was reacting with such near-panic—and so did Mr. Gray, apparently.

It was her. This meeting was beginning to smell like a promotion, and a promotion would bring me closer to Ravana. I wanted nothing to do with her anymore. She poisoned my mind. She killed one man already, and she was filling my head with other violent thoughts. Who would be her next victim? *My* next victim?

She *wanted* me. And I wanted to run.

"What did you say a moment ago about false modesty?"

I scratched my beard with both hands. “Mr. Gray, with all due respect, this is not modesty. It’s reality. I can be of no more use to you. I’m sorry, but I never really could. It was never my intention to waste your time.”

He chuckled. What a sound. I didn’t think he was capable of laughter, and this wasn’t quite laughter. But it was in the ballpark. “You are the furthest thing from a waste,” he said.

He raised his hand toward the door and waved someone inside. I was already sputtering in desperation. “No, no, please understand, sir, I really can’t—this is—I need to be dismissed. I don’t know how to—I’m not—“

Mr. Gray stood as his door opened and cut me off. “Have you met Lorelei, Mr. Maurus?”

Her name shut me up. I twisted in my chair, saw her standing there, in the celestial silver light of this sci-fi throne room, smiling at me. The warmth in her eyes ran me over. She extended her hand to me. “Not formally, I don’t think,” she answered for me. “But I’ve definitely seen you around. It’s a pleasure to meet you officially, Maurus! I’m looking forward to working with you.”

She spoke. She was talking to me! I can’t remember my reply. It was likely horrifying. It likely wasn’t anything. I know I took her hand and at least twitched mine. I was a bug on the

palm of Cleopatra. Maybe I chirped at her or something, like a cricket.

Mr. Gray's voice slithered through the beehive in my head. "Miss Lorelei is a lot like you. A victim of her own success. She has come to work somewhat outside of her field of expertise."

I looked at Mr. Gray. I was probably drooling like an idiot.

He nodded, as if some agreement had been reached. "You understand, then?"

I shook my head, dazed. "I don't understand anything."

Lorelei laughed. She thought I had made a witty joke.

She sat down in the chair next to mine. A perfume like flowery honey wafted over. Mr. Gray remained standing and gestured at her. "For the past year, Lorelei has been the primary handler for our Visitors. She will oversee your liaisons with them and assist you in integrating the experiences. They can be rather a shock."

"Liaisons?" I scratched my beard again, then stopped, worried the sound would gross out Lorelei. "What do you mean by shocking experiences? What Visitors?"

Lorelei leaned toward me and playfully whispered: "Aliens!"

I was braindead. Having Lorelei's lighthearted good nature directed at me was more than I could process, let alone with talk of aliens and "liaisons" with them.

I couldn't look at her. I wish I could have. I had to look at Mr. Gray, which wasn't any less intimidating. "So they're here? We really do have them here?"

Mr. Gray looked in my eyes. "You must have suspected it."

"You want them to teach me," I realized.

Finally, Mr. Gray sat down again. "That is why they are here, it would seem. To teach. But they are difficult to understand. The knowledge gap, as you pointed out, is quite significant. You are our best hope yet for bridging it."

Another dismissal was on my tongue. Another futile plea to leave this place. But seeing Lorelei there, in the corner of my eye, stopped me from uttering it. I managed a glance in her direction. Those laser-blue eyes fried me and I immediately turned away again.

It was a classic demon-on-one-shoulder-angel-on-the-other scenario. Ravana wanted to pull me into her womb and devour my soul. But there was Lorelei, radiating infinite kindness. Not even "trying" to be benevolent, but encouraging benevolence by her presence alone.

If I could gain the courage to look into her eyes, would that be enough to save me?

Somewhat afraid of the answer, I asked: “When do we begin?”

You're funny. Regrets? No, why even ask me that? I have no regrets. It was the best thing I ever did. Poke a lion for sixteen years. You think it'll maul you and feel regret?
I could still be in that shithole of a house. I could still be a toy. So could my mom.
I became what I had to become. Butterflies don't regret growing wings. If I could go back, I'd burn them all over again.

-From Session 3 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 03

I stopped the car in front of the airport. Dolion reached into the backseat and pulled his bag onto his lap. I watched the muscles in his forearm move under his skin.

"Got everything?" I said.

He unzipped the bag and rummaged inside. "You asked me that on the way out."

"You didn't answer me on the way out."

"Yeah, I got everything."

"Then what are you digging for?"

He looked at me. "I'm looking for a hammer to smack you in the head." He zipped the bag back up. It slowly deflated under his arms.

I giggled and reached over and rubbed the back of his head. "Give me a timeframe, fuckhead."

He took my hand and pulled it around to his face and kissed it. "Land in Texas tonight. Locate the fucker tomorrow morning. Watch him for a week, at most. Take him out. Fly home."

"You're sure this is routine?"

He dropped my hand on his bag. “Why do you keep asking that? What are you worried about with this guy?”

I shrugged. “I just have a feeling about this one.”

“Babe, he’s a washed up Air Force guy. I’ve erased Navy SEALs. If it wasn’t routine, they wouldn’t have me doing surveillance for a week with my thumb in my ass. It’s a code green op. Priority normal. Routine.”

I looked out the windshield. Some old lady was getting out of a taxi. She dropped her suitcase as she was pulling it out.

I felt Dolion’s eyes on me. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ll have this dick again by next weekend.”

I looked at him again. “You always know what I need to hear.”

“You could have it right now if you want. No one’s looking.”

“Don’t push it.”

“What? You want me to push it?”

“Get out of my car.”

He leaned over and kissed me and whispered: “Fuck ya then.”

I shouted at his huge gorilla back as he climbed out of the car. “Be safe!”

He shut the door and leaned in the open window. “You be safe. Still no orders yet for you, right?”

“Not yet. As far as I know I’ll be home all week with my thumb in my ass.”

He nodded and pursed his lips in a way that made dimples. Made him look even more like a baby. “Text me if that changes. Love you, bitch.”

“Love you, asswipe.”

He flipped me off and walked into the airport with his finger in the air. The old lady who dropped her suitcase shuffled behind him. She was hunched over. Grimacing. Looked like it took all of her strength just to roll that suitcase behind her. For some reason, she made me sad.

I came home to an empty, quiet apartment. When I’m in an empty, quiet apartment, I think of Mom.

I went into the bedroom and opened the drawer in my nightstand. Pulled out the picture inside. I was little. We were at some kind of fair. Mom was holding me, smiling. I had won a goldfish. It was in a plastic bag that I clutched in tiny, happy fingers.

It’s a dumb picture. If I had found it in Jared Nauls’ photo album, I would have laughed at it. But it’s the only picture I could find of Mom

and me that didn't have my dad or brothers in it. I let the rest of our pictures burn in that house.

I can never look at it for very long. Don't know why I bother trying.

I threw it back in the drawer and slammed it shut. Then I sat on the bed and called Mom.

She answered after one ring. She sounded foggy. Listless. "Hello?"

It was already hard for me to swallow. "Hi Mom."

"Sweetie…" It sounded like she was dozing. I could hear reality TV in the background. Rich women screaming at each other.

"I thought you said you weren't gonna watch that stuff anymore."

"What stuff? You aren't here. You don't know what I'm watching. Maybe I don't even have the TV on."

"Mom, I can hear it."

The TV cut off. "Hear what? Never mind. Where are you? Where've you been? Can you talk about any of it yet? It's so nice to hear from you!"

I winced. I imagined being a lifeguard and finding a dead kid in the water. That's how it felt talking to her.

"No," I said gently. "I told you, I'm working for the government. I won't be able to talk about it for a while. Maybe never."

"But how do I know you're safe? Is it military stuff? I wish you'd never joined those damned marines. They just swept you right up into all this secret stuff. I don't even know where you are." She was on the verge of tears.

"I promise, I'm safe. It's okay."

She sighed. Then giggled. Her tone somersaulted back to smothering joy. "Aw. Well, I wish we could talk more. There's so much I could tell you. You wouldn't believe the shit Joyce is pulling with her flowers."

I pinched the top of my nose. "Which one is Joyce again?"

"Joyce! The fat bitch upstairs. Her leaves are falling down onto *my* balcony."

I sighed. "I thought we bought you that condo so you wouldn't be lonely. So you'd make friends."

"I have friends! Well, I don't need any friends. Sweetie, I miss you. I wish you'd come home."

"I…" I put the phone down on my thigh for a second, picked it back up. "I can't come home."

"Well, I know it isn't really *home.* We can never get that back. But it's nice here. We could

have a lot of fun in this condo. We could *make* it a home. You know?"

"You should make it a home. But I can't. What about the puppy? I thought you were going to get a puppy."

"Oh. Yeah, well. I don't know. I wouldn't have time for it."

"Mom, you don't work. You have time for anything."

"I just don't want to get attached. Don't ask me about any puppies. I don't want to get attached to something. Can you tell me where you are, at least? I mean, can you tell me that little thing?"

My hands were shaking. "I can't tell you anything. I'm sorry. I wish I could. But I'm safe, really. I'm not out in any war zone."

"War zone?! Could they send you to one of those? What would you do *there?*"

"They won't. That's what I'm saying."

She sniffled. "I just don't know anything about this. I don't know where you are." She was sobbing now.

"Mom, please, it's okay. I can't talk long, so can we just—"

"Ah." She cleared her throat and tried to laugh. "Sorry, I'm fine. I'm fine."

I shook my head. “You really should talk to someone. You shouldn’t just sit with this all the time.”

“Sit with who? I don’t need to talk about anything. I’m fine. I just miss my daughter.” She was crying again.

I couldn’t breathe. “Well, I have to get going now,” I said. “But I’ll try to see you soon. As soon as I can.”

“Oh!” She was wailing, but still tried to sound casual. “Okay, sweetie. Just remember I love you. Please remember that. Will you remember?”

“Of course—“

“You’re all I have left, you know. All I have!” She tried to laugh and continued to sob.

That’s as far as I can ever go, when she says that.

“Bye Mom,” I choked out. I hung up. I was shaking everywhere. Little black dots were swirling around my eyes. But I would not cry. That is one thing I would *not* do.

I stood up and tore all the blankets and sheets off the bed. Flung them around and knocked everything off my nightstand. I whipped the mattress until I was dizzy. Kept going until I fainted.

But I didn’t lose a single tear.

Describe my romantic history? I don't have one. I'm a thirty-three year old virgin. A younger me would have been ashamed to admit that. But you come to accept these things. Your life has a pattern, you know? Part of growing up is to stop trying to force your pattern to be something it isn't.

I've had close calls. A few near-hookups in college. But something always seemed to get in the way. I'd get these blackouts. Hours of lost time. I've planned dates with girls for six PM and woken up a day and a half later with her messages on my phone, asking where I'd been. It was pretty spooky. A friend of mine had paranormal theories about it. But I just figured that some subconscious part of me is so terrified of intimacy that I sabotage it before it can even present itself.

-From Session 4 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 04

There was an itch on my knee I didn't want to scratch. The open doorway breathed cold air and the scent of Lorelei's floral perfume. My air vents stopped blowing and ushered in that weird, jarring silence that happens when the noise you mistook for silence is no longer there. I fixated for half a second on the silvery chrome of the hallway walls and felt a warm rush of scorn at the thought of some pretentious architect designing this place according to a fourteen year-old's idea of futurism.

"He's ready for you, Maurus," Lorelei said.

My front door had just opened for her. She stood out there in the hall, her black hair looking even blacker with dampness from a recent shower. She wore a sky blue blouse, the color of her eyes, and there were little dark wet spots on the shoulders where her hair had soaked it. Her pants were black and her shoes were midnight blue suede, with silver on the heels.

It's all so clear, that moment. It's like I'm still in it. It shouldn't be so vivid. Memory generally isn't. But it's like my brain is cherishing

that scene. It was a cutoff point. The last mundane experience I'll ever have.

I know that sounds dramatic, but *fuck.* My day, from that point on, escalated to a level of strangeness that has literally altered the universe. Reality itself entered psychosis, and it clings to its last sane memory.

Or is it me who snapped? Am I insane or is the universe? *Is there even any difference?*

All right, let me try to map out what happened.

Lorelei knocked on my door. I opened it, and she said those enormous words: "He's ready for you, Maurus."

She said them in a sing-songy way, with humor. It wasn't some sacramental intonation. But that's the way it felt. Like a beginning. Like initiation.

We went straight to the cafeteria. Lorelei insisted that I eat a hearty breakfast. Apparently when you first meet a "Visitor" it can take a lot out of you. I had French toast, bacon, and a biscuit, but it was hard to stomach any of it. Lorelei went with her typical oatmeal.

Dr. Carnell followed through on his ritual harassment. As much as I despise him, it was a useful distraction. I hadn't managed to say a word to Lorelei yet. I was like a pimple-faced kid on his first date. Lorelei didn't seem fazed. She

made up for my silence with small talk and jokes. She went out of her way to make me feel welcome with her, because that's what she's like. Thankfully, she probably chalked my nervousness up to the coming meeting with an alien, which wouldn't have been totally inaccurate either.

"Have you thought about my offer?" Carnell asked her. His grin was smug and punchable. I wanted to stab him in the eye with a charred corner of bacon. I looked at the small black camera above their heads and hoped some security guy was watching Carnell's pathetic display and would do something about it. Alas.

"What offer?" She asked, eyes locked to her spinning oatmeal. My delight at her curt tone can't be overstated, given how cheerful she'd been with me all morning.

Carnell scoffed and nearly knocked over the coffee at his elbow. "Whaddya mean, 'what offer?' Lunch!"

She crossed her arms. She didn't look at him. "I already replied to your offer."

His eyes went to the ceiling, strained by thought. "Mmm…oh yeah. Your 'I don't get out much' line. That just means you're thinking about it."

"No. It means I don't get out much."

He beamed. “Well, you’re out now.” He thought this was a playful game. That’s really what he thought.

The microwave beeped. Lorelei pulled out her oatmeal and Carnell handed her her cinnamon. Clockwork. She took it and said nothing. She still didn’t look at him, so she couldn’t see the lust in his eyes as he scanned her frame. I imagined her seeing it and splashing hot oatmeal in his face. It was a pleasant vision, but this time it didn’t overcome me.

“I know you want to get a call out,” he said. “I *know* it. You can’t hide it. You just tell me who you want to contact and I’ll make the arrangements. The only price is lunch. Just one lunch!”

“Sorry,” was her only reply. She stared down into her bowl and stirred it.

Carnell chuckled. “One day.” He touched her shoulder.

She shook his hand off and her face went red. “Do *not* touch me,” she simmered. She grabbed her bowl and made her way to the table. Carnell laughed.

But he stopped laughing when he saw Lorelei sit down with me. Oh my god, his *face.* Da Vinci couldn’t have drawn it more beautifully. I’ve never seen a grin vanish so quickly. I would

give a kidney for a picture of it. He glared at me. I flashed him a smug grin of my own. He started to walk out of the room, realized he forgot his coffee, and went back for it. He flared his nostrils repeatedly as he left for good, like some dumb sniffing animal.

By then, Lorelei had sat down across from me. She managed a friendly smile, but her exuberance was gone. Her cheeks were red and she scowled slightly as she spooned her oatmeal. Without her to fill the void I was leaving in conversation, the silence was dense.

But my little victory gave me the confidence to assert myself. I said something. I spoke to her. It wasn't anything profound or charming, but it didn't make me cringe either, and that was no small achievement.

"What's wrong with that guy?"

Her eyes brightened a bit. They looked at me for the first time with something more than friendly professionalism.

This expression was very brief. She chuckled and looked down into her bowl. "I don't think I'm qualified to answer that question."

I pretended to be ignorant. "Does he do that all the time?"

She twisted her mouth up at one side. "Often enough."

The bitterness in her voice told me all I needed to know. This was more than some casual nuisance. Carnell genuinely bothered her. He may have even frightened her.

I had to stop myself from gasping. The words! That thought that was injected into my brain the other night—the one that seemed to come from Ravana: *Now, you can poison him.*

It finally made sense. I remembered Bohm's discovery that Ravana's corrosive fluid could be changed into any substance. That meant it could become poison. I could easily make up a story that would convince Bohm to do it.

Carnell was scaring Lorelei. He was dangerous and I could stop him. I could poison him. Not enough to kill him. I didn't want to do that. Just enough to remove him from the picture. This could feasibly be done, and I wanted to.

But would I really do it? *Could* I really do it? It was a tasty fantasy, but was that all it was?

"Well, do you have any questions?" Lorelei startled me out of my head. "You haven't said much. I imagine this must be a little daunting. Maybe more than a little."

"Oh," I murmured. You know your life has gotten weird when you actually have to steer your mind *back* to your appointment with an

alien. “Well, yes. I could think of hundreds of questions. But Mr. Gray told me not to ask them until after the meeting.”

She nodded and swallowed a fresh spoonful of oatmeal. “Correctomundo. Why do you think that is, Mr. Maurus?” She imitated Mr. Gray’s voice.

“Isn’t that a question?”

She giggled. “Yes. But I asked you. Look within, my young ward. Why do you think Mr. Gray would tell you to hold your questions about something as fascinating as a Visitor from another world?”

I pushed a piece of bacon around with my fork. The coffee machine farted on the other side of the room. “I suppose he wants me to go into the experience with an open mind. With no preconceptions about what I may encounter.”

“Zing!” She raised her spoon over my head and pretended to anoint me. “A-Plus. Are you going to eat any of that?”

I set my fork down. “I’m having trouble being hungry at the moment.”

She smiled. “I was like that my first time. Box it up then. I *assure* you, you’ll want it later. We can get going as soon as I finish up.”

I looked with dismay at her shrinking oatmeal. My mind scrambled for something else to say, something to move the conversation.

"How did you come to be in this line of work?" If we were in any other line of work, that would have been a terrible, generic question.

She laughed. It was a musical, enchanting sound. "I never meant to, that's for sure. I didn't aim for this."

I chuckled too. "I'm not sure any of us do."

"No one *can.* The Underground finds you. You don't go looking for it."

"But how did it find you? What did you do to attract Black Book's attention?"

She wiped her mouth with a napkin, crumpled it, and set it in her empty bowl. "I cured cancer."

I choked on air. "You did *what?*"

The angel shrugged. "I'm a biologist. Cancer is a malfunction of biology. I figured out how to fix it. Black Book roped me in before I could publish. It was a strange time for me, and I was…" she hesitated, then waved her hand. "Well, anyway. They made it seem like the opportunity of a lifetime. A chance for my 'big break.'" She leaned back in her chair and grinned. "But I didn't read the fine print."

"Meaning what?"

She dipped her head in my direction. "You obviously weren't aware that a cure for cancer had been discovered. Nobody is,

because Black Book took ownership of all my work. They destroyed my old lab and all the evidence of what I'd done."

"Christ almighty, why?"

She took her spoon and drew circles in her oatmeal-smeared bowl. There was a lengthy pause before she looked at me. "Long story. In a nutshell, the idea was that I could perform a greater good here. A 'good' so 'great' that curing cancer would just be an afterthought." She spread her arms. "Four years on and here I am."

Someone coughed, which startled me, because it was a noise that wasn't the coffee machine. I realized how piercingly loud our conversation must have been to everyone else in the room, since no one else talks in this place, ever.

I lowered my voice. "I take it you feel rather betrayed."

I was about to berate myself for such an obvious statement, but her hesitant reaction kept me afloat. Her mouth opened twice to respond, and each time she stopped herself. Her eyes sparkled more than usual. I wondered if it was the beginning of tears. She finally said: "I'll let you know when I decide."

"So you enjoy what you do now, then?" I probed. "More than curing cancer? You're

pleased, at least in some sense, with how things have turned out?"

Her hand came up slightly and she studied her black nail polish. Then she smiled thinly and stood. "This is one of those times when it's better to show than to tell. Are you ready?" She scooped up her bowl and left the table before I could answer.

We boxed up my leftovers and she led me to the elevators, down and through the endless maze of M-5, the lowest level of The Underground. She said nothing on the way, other than to deny my request to drop my food off at my domicile. I'd need it shortly, she insisted. As we walked, I worried that I'd been too intrusive. Were my questions too personal? Too emotionally familiar?

I'm just paranoid. People ask each other questions. That's how conversations work, right? Her sudden quiet was probably simple anticipation. My life was about to change and she didn't want to throw any more thoughts at me than necessary.

We wandered the labyrinth of M-5 for eternity. M-5 is the largest basement on planet Earth and it smells like it. You can walk so far and for so long in the undecorated halls, with no sound but the buzzing happy lights, and no contact with other humans, that you begin to

forget you're awake. Your breathing is too loud, and the grayish walls and grayer floor are so nondescript that everywhere looks like everywhere else. Don't ask me how any of us learn our way around this place, but somehow we do. It's a winding, unintuitive mess, just like the minds of all who live down here.

Eventually, we made it to a giant steel door. It wasn't totally unlike Hangar Fourteen's cathedral doors, only it was more of an oval, like some arcane Vault. There was a retinal scanner on the wall beside it, a plain black panel with a red light in the center.

"Okay," Lorelei breathed. "This is it, Maurus. You're sure you're ready? Once you go through this door, there's no going back. Everything changes."

The awe in her voice made me cold. It was real awe—not her exaggerative humor. What she said had been true for her, and it was about to be true for me.

I looked at her and gulped. "Well, I don't have much choice, do I?"

She pointed at the retinal scanner. "You should have clearance by now. Give your eyeballs a scan, and we'll go in."

My eyeballs were deemed worthy. The Vault opened with the dramatic hum of some great

magnetic seal. Inside was what I could only describe as a militarized penthouse. The lights were so dim that it felt like candlelight. We were in a kind of “front hall” that curved in either direction, so that the chamber appeared to be shaped like a horseshoe or doughnut. Like the rest of The Underground, it was ugly and uninviting. More metal walls and concrete floors. The smell of cleaning chemicals stung my nose hairs. In the ironic fashion of a public bathroom, this had the effect of making the place feel more dirty, not less.

Directly in front of us was a miniature “waiting room” or lounge, with about a half dozen leather chairs and glass end tables. Mr. Gray sat here, facing the Vault door, doing nothing. He didn’t even fidget.

“Ah good,” he said in a hushed tone. “I’m pleased to see you’ve made it, Mr. Maurus.”

The Vault door shut us in. Weirdly, it didn’t make any sound. It locked with a seismic thud that I could feel in my chest, but couldn’t hear.

“How is he today?” Lorelei asked.

Mr. Gray stood. “Well enough, I think. Quite lucid. Best to take advantage. We should begin immediately.”

He glided down the corridor to our right and motioned for us to follow. We rounded the

bend and came to a simple metal door at the left of the hall. It had a small, square window in the center. It looked like a cell in a psyche ward. There was a faint golden glow coming through the glass, like firelight, but I couldn't make out anything else from my side.

Mr. Gray put his hand on the knob and gave me a stern look. "You would do well to brace yourself," he whispered. "You may become emotional or overwhelmed, but you mustn't panic. It will worsen everything."

Lorelei took my breakfast out of my hand. "I'll just hold on to this for you."

Mr. Gray glanced at each of us, then opened the door and guided us in.

I was blasted out of my body before I even got in the room. I was instantly in another world, or another time.

There was a massive staircase made of stone. My knees throbbed and my heart pounded. We were almost to the top. Lorelei, or what seemed to be Lorelei, was ahead of me. She wore a green ceremonial dress, accented with dazzling geometric patterns of blue and gold. Her hair was braided and filled with beads, and she clattered with bone jewelry. I looked down and saw that I wore only rags for shorts. They were brown and tattered. Stripes of black war paint crisscrossed over my chest and arms.

It was hot and unbearably humid. My sweat and the muggy air had smeared my paint during the climb.

At last, we finished our ascent. I turned back and saw a great forest stretching to the horizon. We were standing at the top of a stone pyramid, several hundred feet in the air. Water vapor drifted over the trees and dissolved in the sun.

Something whipped my back and left a line of searing pain. "Do not turn your back on your master!" Shouted Lorelei. I spun around. She glared at me, her face decorated with paint of her own, only hers was colorful. More elegant. And she wasn't exactly Lorelei.

She was my mother. Alice. But she was still Lorelei too, sort of. Wherever I was, it was a place structured by dream logic, where the laws of physics were only imitated occasionally, and people and objects could change according to the drift of the moment. This woman felt *like Lorelei, but she had my mother's face. And she acted like my mother.*

She yanked a leash that I realized only then had been tied around my neck. I was thrown to the ground, on my hands and knees, my throat torn by a fit of coughing. Alice/Lorelei kicked me in the chest. As I was thrown onto my back I noticed a silver star on the strap of her

sandal. It had punctured my chest and released a rivulet of blood. The blocks of the pyramid were jagged and dug into my back. Every tiny pebble was red hot, like sand baked by an unforgiving sun. The pain was so vivid. *Everything was. This place was more real than "real" life. It blazed with a sense of memory. I had been here before, a lifetime ago, or maybe several lifetimes ago.*

"Maurus," said Alice/Lorelei. "I'd like you to meet Ezekiel."

She tugged at my leash and I tilted my head up. There was a throne made of skulls, and on it was a giant snake made of pulsing webs of color. Its lower half was coiled in what might have been a sitting position, but uncoiled when I made eye contact. Its eyes shined white like little suns. I couldn't quite look at them. On its head was a golden crown, or light in the shape of a crown.

The Color Serpent rose from its throne and slithered over the air and over me. A tongue made of shadow flicked out of its glowing mouth and licked the blood that had pooled in my navel. The tongue was barbed and made new, smaller wounds.

"Focus, Maurus!" Demanded my mother/ Lorelei.

As if in response, the Serpent struck. Its head moved too fast for human eyes. Fangs of fire sunk into my chest and punctured my heart. The flames burned, paradoxically, with cold, like frostbite. I screamed and witnessed my beating heart pulled out of my chest and swallowed by the snake.

I lay there in agony that was spiritual rather than physical—which, mind you, didn't make it any less unpleasant. The Serpent and Lorelei watched me howl for a minute. I knew I was dead, or should have been.

But then the Serpent began to gyrate. It stretched and contracted in a few pulsing rhythms, then regurgitated. Like a mother owl vomiting pellets for its babies, the Serpent deposited a "new" heart made of light into my open wound.

An ecstatic electricity surged through my veins, and just as I was about to totally surrender myself to relief and joy—

I was back in the "real" world, whatever that meant. I was in a fetal position in the corner of what looked like a small conference room. On one side was a glass partition, behind which sat two people in medical garb. They looked dazed and dreamy. Lorelei's aides, I assumed. In the middle of the room was a rectangular table with

four chairs, and there was another door in the wall behind it, though I couldn't see where it led.

At the far end of the table I saw, or thought I saw, the Color Serpent, wrapping itself around the back of the chair. I blinked, and then it wasn't the snake, but a small figure, humanoid, like a little boy. An elf. It was like an elf or fairy from old folklore, dressed in a silver, tight-fitting suit, skin glowing pale and translucent, white hair long and silky. It was the size of a kid, three or four feet tall. Bright green eyes, very large and ovular, leered at me. It was grinning, like all of this was a joke.

"It's okay, Maurus. Hey! Are you with me?" I noticed Lorelei was holding my hand. I barely had time to notice. She shook my arm. "*Focus, Maurus.* Listen to my voice. Do you hear my voice?"

"An elf?" I cried. "It's a fucking *elf?"*

"Everyone sees something their first time. Just focus, Maurus. Listen to my voice. The sound of your name, Maurus. Do you hear that?"

Everyone sees something? What the hell did that mean? It wasn't an elf?

Then it was the Serpent again, the Rainbow Snake, eyes blazing nuclear fusion. I looked into them and was sucked into a psychic abyss.

"Oh god," I choked, grabbing at my temples. It was in my head. I could feel it sifting through my thoughts. *The alien was inside my mind.* "Oh *god!*"

"It's all right," Lorelei soothed. Her thumb stroked my hand. That would have been too much intimacy for me to handle under normal circumstances. But right now it meant nothing. I could barely feel it. I could barely feel *any* of my body, and what little I could was a kind of icy tingle.

My entire being was focused on this new presence—an *intruder* of a sort the mind has evolved no defenses for. A foreign psychic force had thrown my soul open and was reading it with casual interest. I knew then how a mouse must feel in the claws of a hawk. I was helpless, not only physically, mentally and emotionally, but spiritually.

I can't believe I keep using that word.

It was horrifying, in one sense. But in another sense, it was indescribably beautiful. This is what it felt like to be born. I had suddenly emerged into a new world, feeble and defenseless, with a vista of potential ahead. My life was in the hands of a higher power that I didn't understand. Just like a baby in a hospital.

There was no parental devotion from the alien though. No angelic love. What I got from it

was *curiosity.* Intrigue. I was a new specimen, squirming in its petri dish. It poked at bits of my soul that were so remote I hadn't even known they existed.

Time wasn't the same in this state of psychic openness. Eternity flew by. I wondered if babies feel the same way, fresh out of the womb.

A small measure of bodily awareness slowly returned. Eventually, I saw the blue of Lorelei's eyes, her shirt. The spots of moisture from her showered hair had dried up.

When she spoke, it still seemed to be from across a chasm. "Maurus! Can you hear me? Can you tell me anything about what you're experiencing? Try to focus, Maurus. It will help if you talk to me. Listen to my voice, Maurus, and the sound of your name."

"There's…so much…" was all I could say. Touching this alien's mind, I felt like my brain had been plugged into a supercomputer. I was buried in an avalanche of information. My neurons burned. I thought it would kill me. It's not like the alien was actually feeding me all this information. It was just a consequence of proximity, like moist air blowing over a beach. It was the psychic equivalent of sunburn.

I probably could have learned quite a bit about this alien, if I could have comprehended

any of the data. But most of it didn't make sense and was even outright absurd—flashes of symbol and imagery that reminded me again of dream logic. What information I could grasp was mostly to do with *me.* Whatever parts of me the alien was looking at were thrown back in my face.

It's batshit crazy. How can a being from another world be a mirror?

The overcharged presence of the alien finally began to fade. Over Lorelei's shoulder, I could see it had taken the form of an elf again. It hopped down from its chair and padded over to the door behind it. It turned the knob with light, graceful movements and went inside and the door swung shut.

Now it was totally gone. My mind was comfortably alone again. All my muscles were sore from clenching. Hunger reached the point of nausea. I began to drift into what I hoped was a coma.

But just before the door closed, a stinkbug flew out of the shrinking crack between our room and the one the alien was stepping into. It buzzed over to the glass partition where the doctors were. I could see that Mr. Gray was with them, watching me with arms crossed. The stinkbug landed on the glass and covered his face.

REMINDER TO ALL EMPLOYEES: Any attempt to “jailbreak” your DAS-5-issued cell phone is a violation of your contract. Your phones are intended for use on M-Facility servers only. If you would like to contact someone off-base, fill out a contact request form and submit it to your department manager. If the reason for contact is sufficiently serious, and if the subject to be contacted meets agency standards for discretion compliance, a supervised phone call may be granted. Employees found to have “jailbroken” their phones will be subjected to penalties, including, but not limited to, criminal charges. Thank you for your attention.

-M-Facility Administration—Message To All Employees

DAS-5 Archives
Department of Biology
Beyond Biology: Morphophysiological Analysis of EBE-9
Written by: Codename Lorelei

Abstract: DAS-5 biologists have long been puzzled by the recurrence of fatal illness among EBEs—Extraterrestrial Biological Entities (known colloquially within the agency as "Visitors")—who reside at M-Facility for extended periods. The apparent mutability of EBE cell structure, allowing them to take whatever form they deem suitable for their circumstances, would seem to preclude them from chronic ailments or disease. It follows, for instance, that if one held perfect control over biological processes, and could alter the very nature of these processes at will, then disease ought also to be under the same control—and indeed, should have no stable mitochondrial ground on which to take hold in the first place. Why, then, has every extraterrestrial subject in the history of DAS-5 exhibited the same gradual decline of health, with ostensibly the same symptoms, before slipping into death?
I have attempted to answer this question with a progressive study of blood and tissue samples

taken from EBE-9, a then-living EBE with the same terminal prognosis as its predecessors, followed by a full autopsy of EBE-9 upon its death. In this paper, I hope to demonstrate that the EBEs exhibit what might best be called a "symbolism of biology," lending credence to the maligned "Demon Theories" of early DAS-5 doctors, who suggested that the EBEs are psychic and/or archetypal beings rather than material ones—though they assume material form when it suits them—and that their apparent progression of disease and death represents a test or display for DAS-5, and the leadership of humanity in general, which we have thus far failed.

Introduction: Since the late 1940s, the EBEs have presented themselves to the United States government via a slew of crash landings and other supposed "accidents" with striking regularity. The discovery of EBE-1, alive and well amidst the debris of the infamous Roswell crash, made it clear to leading intelligence officials of the day that they were not dealing with sophisticated Soviet spy planes. Popular culture today regards the idea of extraterrestrial civilizations from the far reaches of space with a kind of inevitability, as if it were only a matter of time before we "make contact." But it is easy to

forget that the men who founded DAS-5 as we know it, in the aftermath of Roswell, did not have backgrounds in modern astronomy. The science of the day had only begun to glimpse the true vastness of the cosmos, and many members of government at the time were not well read in this area. The progenitors of DAS-5 were, in 1947, men in their fifties and sixties, who understood the universe mainly through religious lenses.

This, coupled with the overwhelming psychological phenomena that occur in the presence of the EBEs, makes it easy to understand why the initial fear on the part of the U.S. government, upon encountering EBE-1 and his technology, was that he represented a race of "demons," and that flying saucers came not from some other planet, but from Hell itself.

The first private academic studies of EBE-1, and what functioning technology remained on his person, reflected this reaction. The first extensive physiological analysis of EBE-1, carried out five days after his "capture," concluded that he "[possessed] an incorporeal biology that cannot have evolved on this planet, or any planet." (Whitley, 1947) Psychoanalysts assigned to assess EBE-1 reported, among other things, that "[EBE-1] knows things that no one can know, and, in the manner of what some

have called the Devil, displays a keen interest in dark secrets of the human soul that ought best to be kept secret." (Keel et al., 1951)

Without spending undue time on the history of DAS-5's relationship with the EBEs, it will be sufficient to say that the idea of EBEs as "demons" remained in fashion until roughly the 1970s, when the agency began to allot more rigorous scientific resources to the study of the beings. Today, these early "Demon Theories" are something of a joke among members of the agency privy to the pertinent history.

While it may indeed be absurd to assign labels borne of human superstition to a non-human intelligence, it may not be absurd at all to reexamine theories about the nature of the EBEs that suggest a kind of "incorporeality" to their being, and a "psychic" explanation of their origins. Paradoxically, it is not psychological or even quantum physical data that I draw on to support my proposal. Rather, I have begun from a place of solid—albeit exotic—biology.

Analysis of Living EBE Tissue: EBE-9 was highly amenable to the donation of blood, skin, and even "non-essential" organ samples for my research—she even regurgitated a specimen that my aides and I analogized with a kidney. Given that the EBEs can regenerate whatever

tissue they require in seconds, it follows that the relinquishment of biological material is an "inexpensive" gesture for them.

As with previous studies of EBE tissue, cellular histology revealed a uniform population of morphologically amorphous units exhibiting totipotent behavior. Intracellular scaffolding was also observed to possess highly adaptive morphokinetic properties, consistent with the composition of self-reorganizing nano-polymers and quantum-responsive filament structures identified in previous studies (Lorelei, 2022, Lorelei & Bohm, 2024). Systemic reconfiguration of organelle functionality was, paradoxically, hyperactive under isolated environmental conditions, yet rapidly stabilized in the presence of external stimuli, suggesting a natural state of "biological superposition" or "chaos" when isolated—a state nicknamed "primordial soup." Protein filaments exhibited phase transitions in response to both electromagnetic and simulated bioelectric stimulation.

These properties lead to a state I have termed "pan-adaptive cytomorphology." There is apparently no limit to the forms EBE cells can take, and no constraints on their ability to change.

Unsurprisingly, sequencing analysis failed to identify a stable genome. All living samples

displayed liquid-state genomic architectures, with transient nucleotide configurations responding to environmental input in real time.

Much of this serves as confirmation of previously established data. But developments in bioelectric imaging technology have opened the way for exciting new contextualizations of this otherwise baffling biological profile.

Electromagnetic resonance analysis: Despite the incomprehensibility of the EBE's cellular profile, almost all previous studies of their biology have been focused entirely on biomolecules. Though this is my personal field of expertise, I decided to attempt to observe the problem from a different perspective, in the hopes of gaining new insights. The application of advanced magneto-acoustic imaging yielded results that, I submit, open the doors to a profile of EBE physiology that goes beyond biology as we know it.

Full-body bioelectric imaging revealed a lattice-like field permeating EBE-9, which seemed to act as a morphogenetic scaffold. Though the "shape" of the field displayed subtle shifts to accommodate the various permutations of form that EBE-9 demonstrated during the experiment, it remained largely consistent as an electromagnetic "shadow" of

EBE-9's general person. What shifts it did display occurred approximately .3 - .5 milliseconds *before* changes in morphological composition, suggesting that gene expression was governed by localized electromagnetic resonance fields rather than "traditional" DNA-RNA transcription pathways.

Given the long-documented tendency of EBEs to adopt "favorite" forms in the presence of certain individuals (see Barker, 2008), it now seems increasingly likely that—as the EBEs themselves have repeatedly suggested—their morphological changes are not mimicries of forms seen on other worlds, but should be thought of rather as reactive convergences upon forms optimized for psychological resonance with observers.

The natural question then arose: in what sense could a being like this be "sick?" Like in previous studies, there were no foreign viruses or bacteria detected in any tissue samples that could account for the illnesses that EBEs invariably develop in our environment. From a purely biomolecular point of view, this would be puzzling enough. When considering a form of life that now appears to be fundamentally based in electromagnetic fields, the problem becomes even more vexing. What would an "infection" look like in a uniform lattice of electromagnetic

resonance? Would we even be able to recognize it?

As of this writing, we do not have a field of science that can address these questions.

Postmortem analysis: EBE-9 died in a form that has colloquially been referred to as a "Gray," an image with strong ties to popular culture. The form presents in a bipedal configuration, in this case 174 centimeters in height, well within typically reported measurements. Complexion appeared matte gray with a subtle iridescence under polarized light. No hair, ears, or genitalia could be identified. Cranial proportions were exaggerated relative to the body, accounting for 38% of body mass. Eyes black, scleral-free, and highly convex. Limbs were elongated and flexible, with 4 digits per limb, each capable of full axial rotation.

Gross dissection revealed a complete absence of fixed organ systems, with no distinguishable heart, lungs, or digestive tract. The internal substrate was composed, instead, of an undifferentiated gel-like matrix with embedded microfilament structures forming temporary, function-specific networks. No solid structures were found that could be compared to bones. The outsized cranial cap appeared to

consist of little more than a “localized encrustment” of the gel matrix. These findings are contrary to x-ray images taken of EBE-9 and her predecessors while living, which do indicate the presence of organ systems—or at least organ analogs, such as the “kidney” EBE-9 produced for the project. This suggests either that, at the time of death, whatever internal organ systems the EBEs have “adopted” default to an amorphous state, or that they only “display” organ systems upon examination for our convenience or comfort—or even, perhaps, to borrow a phrase that has become popular in M-Facility when discussing EBE behavior, “for absurdity’s sake.” (Bohm, 2014)

Microanalysis of this gel-like substance revealed a lattice of neural networks distributed throughout the body matrix, mirroring the lattice structure of the body’s electromagnetic/morphogenetic field. Preliminary examinations suggest that the neural fibers are laced with quantum-coherent biomaterials, producing interference patterns unexplainable by classical models. This finding lends credence to an almost off-hand remark from a previous study, which suggested that the atomic structure of the EBEs “consists solely of free-floating, coherent electron clouds.” (Jacques, 2019) This,

too, however, is absurd by the standards of known science.

In any case, it seems that the best way to *conceptualize* all these biological marvels is to say that, on the level of matter, the EBEs are made of cells that could *most closely* be described as neurons, meaning that the most suitable analogy we can manage from the annals of human science is that the bodies of EBEs are, effectively, *something like* ultra-plastic, hyper-connective, self-transforming brains.

Conclusions: If, then, the EBEs are fundamentally brains—that is to say, fundamentally *mind*—it must follow that their fundamental nature is mental, or psychic. Brains and neurons are, after all, either the vehicles or generators of what we call consciousness, depending on one's philosophical preferences. Thus, if the EBEs inevitably become ill during extended stays on planet Earth, it must not be physiological illnesses that they suffer from, but mental ones.

To better understand these pathologies, we must understand the machinations that underlie mental illness. This is no small ask, as we still understand so little about the nature of the *human* mind, which is itself so feeble and

simple compared to those of the EBEs. To that end, I can only offer a handful of suggestions, which, given the confounding nature of the phenomena we're dealing with, should only be taken on a speculative basis:

1. Emotions are the primary drivers of mental phenomena—perhaps the only drivers, depending how we choose to define them. Therefore, "mental" illnesses are actually emotional illnesses.

2. If mental illnesses stem from emotional maladies, then the EBEs are dying of emotional diseases here at M-Facility, and perhaps the Earth more broadly.

3. A preponderance of EBE behavior depends on mirroring the "souls"—that is to say, the core emotional nexuses—of the people around them. EBEs seem so preoccupied with human souls, in fact, that one might reasonably conclude that the emotions of human beings are somehow central to the agenda of the EBEs.

4. Indeed, it is also well known that the EBEs frequently express "mystical" ideas that raise the state of the "soul" to a place of cosmic significance—the emotional/psychic state of human beings, and very possibly all

sentient beings, the EBEs say, is central to the unfoldment of reality.

5. If emotions are cosmically fundamental, and the EBEs spend the majority of their time on Earth ensconced in human emotion, and inevitably die in a span of three to five years, then it follows that *we humans are infecting the EBEs with some kind of emotional disease that they are not equipped to deal with.*

If this hypothesis is true, the question arises: why should the EBEs risk any association with human beings at all? To do so is far more than what might be called "professional risk." It has, thus far, amounted to certain death.

What is so important about the human soul that EBEs are willing to die for it?

I propose that we think of the situation from their point of view. Humans, it would seem, are a kind of cosmic biohazard. The first step in dealing with a pathogenic outbreak is to contain it. Containment involves careful observation and *quarantine* of the infected, carried out by exceptionally brave individuals who are perfectly willing to put their lives at risk for the sake of it.

Our planet may very well be akin to a galactic quarantine zone. We humans are

infected, and yet maintain a rapid pace of technological development. We are racing to the gap of our planetary womb—to the attainment of interstellar travel and colonization of the galaxy. In order to keep our infestation from spreading through the stars, we have been placed under cosmic lockdown. A scout team of selfless EBEs have been working to contain our psychic disease for decades. But if our pathogen is emotional, that means the onus is on *us* to resolve it. All the EBEs can do—and this may indeed be their hope—is to reveal the source of our infection to us. They cannot vaccinate us. We must do that ourselves, and to accomplish this we must abandon the emotional self-neglect that has become our norm.

If we continue to fail in this regard—and who can say how much time we have left?—then we are left with an extremely disturbing possibility.

When a pandemic spins out of control, and all containment efforts have failed, the final desperate resort is, of course, mass sterilization.

Am I afraid *of my mother? What an odd question. I don't know. I've never thought about it like that.*
Isn't everyone, to some degree? Don't our parents loom over us, sort of, in our heads? Both of them do. Why single out my mother? I don't know how to answer this.

-From Session 5 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 05

I had a dream that wasn't a dream.

The room was bluish, like my childhood, barely lit with the pale glow of a digital clock. 3:33. Navy carpet, gray walls, rocket ships dangling from the ceiling, wooden bookshelves filled with models and little machines I'd built. I lay in a bed that was too small and enjoyed the thought that The Underground hadn't been real, that I'd just awoken from it.

These warm and fuzzy feelings were vaporized by a white light that blasted through the window and seared my eyes. I tried to cover my face, but my arms wouldn't budge. Tingly vibrations swam through my body. I made to scream, but could only choke. Nothing would move but my eyes, so I blinked like a maniac.

It didn't help. The light washed over me. It was cold, the light, and for some reason that alarmed me more than anything else that was happening. It amplified the tingles in my veins to a point of almost-pain. Something brushed the back of my head. I thought it was a bug and tried to swat at it. My arms reminded me that they were paralyzed with the sting of icy needles.

To my relief and terror, I realized it wasn't a bug. It was my hair sliding over the pillow. I was floating. The light was carrying me off the bed and over to the window.

It didn't stop. The window was closed and I kept moving toward it. Was this how it was going to end? Shove me through the window and bleed me to death with thousands of shards of glass?

No. I literally floated through the window. It didn't break. I went actually through it, like it wasn't real.

Aha. So I was dead already. I was now hovering over my backyard, suspended by a blinding beam of white light. Isn't that what people see when they die?

I flew faster now. The light rotated me like a piece of deli meat as I rose above the trees. This wasn't so bad, I tried to think. There were worse ways to go. I could have been Edwin.

No. My rotisserie-orbit brought my eyes into contact with the source of the light, and then I was done for. Panic hit me like a train and dragged all my rational thoughts like human meatloaf over the tracks.

It was Ravana. She finally had me. A chorus of heavenly angels ushering eternal paradise was too good for me, I guess. Instead,

I got her, *dragging me up into her death-womb at last.*

I sobbed internally. I screamed prayers to gods I never knew and begged her to leave me alone, just LEAVE ME ALONE.

It meant nothing to her. I went all the way up and her darkness swallowed me. A gooey, black foam molded to my body. I was shrink-wrapped. I tasted something like blood or sweat as the foam squeezed my face. I don't know how I was able to breathe.

Time malfunctioned. There was movement, a sudden rocket blast into space, a blur of billions of stars joined together by some post-relativistic rush that I shouldn't have been able to see through Ravana's suffocating walls. Maybe I was the stars, all bleeding together. Maybe I was Ravana, and she was space. Absurd thoughts like these somehow made sense in this dream-within-fever-dream interim.

Eventually, the fog cleared. I found myself in a square white room, walls featureless and bright with light from nowhere. I was no longer shrink-wrapped, though I may still have been inside Ravana. I didn't know. But I was altogether coherent again, feeling more or less like myself.

I was standing in front of a huge window. Earth was outside, a blue-green gem. Some of

my previous horror melted, looking at it. The astronauts weren't kidding—the sight was precious enough to change me. Down there was a mother of infinite children. It was a jewel of aliveness in a dead universe. Lightning glittered over Africa. Sunrise crept across Asia. The atmosphere was such vibrant blue that it felt like a celebration. Now there *was a womb. There was a place to be born. Beauty brought me to tears. I fell to my knees and wept.*

This room I was in had no doors and no apertures of any kind other than the window. But somehow, someone entered. Or was, gradually, there*. To "enter" implies an exit, from another room into this one, and that's not what happened. Togetherness simply grew behind me. I felt it come on. I couldn't see it with my back turned, but it "shimmered" into being. That's an odd word for it, but I don't have a better one.*

The effect of this someone on my mind was similar—I had been alone in my head, and then I wasn't. Another presence blanketed my soul like a cloud of dust. I knew this presence. It came with ancient familiarity. My relationship to this being was older than time.

I wish that made it less horrifying. I'd still been on my knees as this thing "arrived," and

now I went all the way to the floor and curled into a fetal position. I didn't want to look at it.

"How long will you hide from me, Maurus?"

It was the voice of a succubus-queen—deep, monarchical, threatening, yet also, despite all this, eternally loving. It was the telepathic voice that told me to poison Carnell.

It was Ravana's voice. She was standing behind me.

"Leave me alone," I whimpered, like a mouse.

"LOOK AT ME."

A telekinetic force snapped my eyes open and threw me onto my other side. I screamed like a child. Incorporeal claws held my eyes open, showed me the goddess.

She was a bug. Seven feet tall, razor-thin, exoskeleton green and patterned like leaves. She was a giant preying mantis, bladed forearms poised contemplatively beneath her dripping mandibles. A purple robe patterned with elegant, golden geometry was draped over her stick-like body. Enormous black eyes wrapped halfway around her head. Terror made me want to vomit, but she wouldn't let me. I could do nothing unless she permitted it. Even though she was on the other side of the room, I was in the grip of those mantid claws. I was

prey, paralyzed but alive, prepared for her feeding.

"Was it not beautiful?" Her words flashed with the image of Earth as I'd just seen it, like an open-eyed vision, and all my awed and devoted feelings for it flooded my nerves again.

"Yes," I couldn't help saying. I reached out to it, desperate to be back there, in some green haven with birdsong, among natural things, away from steel bunkers and flying saucers and aliens.

Instantly, I was suffocating in Ravana's womb again. Cocooned. We shot toward Earth, greens and blues swirling up to meet me at near-light speed. Humans aren't built for physics-defying speeds. Again I wanted to vomit, and again Ravana's influence held my nausea in place. I still couldn't close my eyes.

We stopped as quickly as we'd blasted off, which was equally jarring and equally impossible, from a physics point of view. It should have been fatal. But Ravana drifted casually over a smooth, clear surface and dropped me onto it. I fell out of her with a splatter of amniotic fluids. Far below the glass was a sprawling rainforest, rivers running like veins to a horizon of mountains. A chorus of waterfalls sang in their timeless way.

I looked around, saw that we were on a crystalline platform about the size of a stage, floating hundreds of feet above the treetops. Ravana sat on a black throne set between two golden spires, each topped with an eight-pointed star. She dragged me over with another telekinetic yank. The rush of air chilled my soaked skin. Like a puppet, she brought me to a kneeling position. I bowed with involuntary reverence.

"You cry and I provide," she said in my mind, compound eyes baring over me. "You wanted Nature, and here we are. Am I not a doting mother?"

I looked at the sky. It was bluer than I remembered. Puffs of cloud drifted along, going nowhere. They were real. *Wind scattered a few, reduced them to tendrils that dissipated as I watched.*

"How can you do this?" I asked, stretching my hand out as if to catch a piece of reality.

"It is not I *who do it," she said. She spoke in a sing-song way, like an evil, mocking fairy.*

"Me?" I scoffed.

"We," she corrected, her mandibles squeaking.

"Don't," I flared. "Don't do that. Don't imply we're somehow the same. We're not. I

don't do this. I can't make worlds. We are not *the same!"*

She laughed. It was the laugh of someone who knew a secret and was amused by my ignorance of it. "Be as angry as you like," she said. "It will not part you from me."

I did want to be angry. Instead, I was deflated. Our telepathic link made it hard to deny her. I could feel *her conviction as naturally as I felt my own rage. The line between us was barely a line at all—a haze at best, an illusion at worst.*

"What do you want?" I asked, shaking my head in despair. "What do you want from me?"

"I want what all mothers want. You're a little baby. I want you to become a strong, healthy man."

Anger swelled up again. "You are not my fucking mother."

Ravana laughed. She rubbed the blades of her insect forearms together.

"What do you want?" I asked again.

"It's what you want, child," she sang. "I see it everyday." She leaned forward in her throne, moved her giant bug eyes over my head. "I smell it too. How you wish you could do, *and* act. *How you wish you could participate in the world instead of observing it."*

Up so close, I noticed she smelled like burned wire. Juice from her mandibles dripped into my hair.

I shook my head. But I couldn't argue. She had me pegged. I was still in her clutches. Still the little insect being chewed alive by the bigger one.

"Don't be like that," she chided, sensing my unhappy metaphors. "There is hope for you. A way to become what you must. An opportunity is coming. Soon."

I clasped the back of my neck in my hands and squeezed. "What do you want?" I repeated.

"Must I always answer questions you have already answered yourself? Do you ever want to fly from my nest? You know what I want. You know what it is you must do."

One huge compound eye stared into mine. It was the size of my whole head—I could see the individual hexagons that made it up. I wanted to poke it with a needle. Pop it like a balloon. Ravana knew that, and knew I couldn't do it. I wasn't even paralyzed anymore, and yet, I remained spineless. She read these thoughts too, with a chuckle.

"What is this thing I'm supposed to do?" I asked through clenched teeth.

“You tell me,” she snapped. “Say it. It is on your tongue.”

I stared at one of the golden lines in her robe, the folds and billows of the oversized cloth over her walking-stick of a body, and wondered how it even stayed on her.

“You want me to poison him,” I realized. “Carnell. You want me to poison Carnell.”

“Once again, little Maurus,” she clicked, “it is you who wants it. I am only that which makes you fully yourself. I am the rain that waters the soul-flower. But it is up to you to bloom.”

I looked down, into that beautiful forest. She was right. I did want it. I wanted to poison him. I hated that I never would have seriously considered it if not for Ravana, and I hated that she knew it.

“Listen now,” she went on. “The doctor will not appear tomorrow. He will hide in his shame. But the next day, he will return. He will make an attempt at vengeance. You must get to him first.”

“How?”

She said nothing. Something howled in the wilderness.

“The fluid?”

“Yes. You can turn it to venom.”

“Bohm can. But what if he doesn’t? What if I can’t convince him? Bohm would never agree to a poisoning.”

Her tone had a drop of amusement. “You tell him it’s for the girl. For the good of her projects. They collaborated once. He has great faith in her work. What’s more, this will not be so much a lie. You will be saving her life. And her life must be saved, for her work is very important indeed.”

“How can you know all that?”

“I know because you do. Listen now. You ask for two amounts. One for eleven milligrams. The other for a single milligram. You give the higher dose to the doctor. Save the smaller one for later. Do you understand?”

“Why? What’s the smaller dose for?”

“You will know when it is time. Do you understand what you must do?”

I nodded. A raven flapped by under our crystal palace.

“Say it please,” Ravana hummed.

“Two separate doses of poison. One for eleven milligrams. The other for a single milligram. The higher dose goes to Carnell. The smaller one I save for a rainy day.”

“Good. Now,” she rumbled. “Look at me!”

She was so stern that I looked up without thinking. Her awful eyes held me for a moment. Everything went quiet. The waterfalls stopped gushing and the rainforest held its breath.

Ravana leaned back in her throne, folded her mantis arms prayer-like under her version of a chin. "You enjoy this environment," she said flatly. It wasn't a question. It felt more like a threat.

I felt like I had to reply in order to deflect some kind of attack. "Yes…very much."

The silence was deafening now. Ravana stared into the distance, still as death. "Look upon that which you love."

Psychic arms twisted my body around before I could react. An explosion came from everywhere at once, as if the fabric of reality was a sheet that had been whipped straight. The mountains in the distance blew their tops off and spewed ash and lava. The earth quaked so hard that all the leaves on all the trees hissed like steam from a pipe. I screamed and covered my punctured ear drums with my hands. The ground itself cracked open and seeped more lava and set the forest ablaze. The sky was a hellish red that ash was quickly painting black. I dove onto my stomach as streaks of lightning arced inches overhead. Below, all the rivers and

waterfalls turned to steam and fogged up the glass floor.

"No!" I cried. "No, god, stop it! Make it stop, god! It can't happen! Oh god no!" I lay there like a fetus with my head in my arms, babbling an array of incoherent phrases like this, trying uselessly to hide from armageddon.

"It will *happen," Ravana assured me, her stern, snakelike voice as loud in my head as the apocalypse outside. "This is what will come to pass."*

"Noooo," I sobbed. "No, no it can't! Please! God, no! It can't happen!"

A bolt of lightning hit the other side of the platform. The stench of ozone burned my nose. An asteroid came down and obliterated one of the mountains. I wailed and rolled around and babbled nonsense.

"It is what will come to pass," Ravana repeated, "if you cannot find your way. If you do not become what you must become."

That "if" was a buoy. My soul wrapped itself around that word, that floating hope in the middle of a thrashing ocean. "Yes, anything," I begged. "I'll do anything. What do I need to do?" Smoke enveloped the platform now and funneled into my throat. I coughed and tasted blood.

"You need to look at me."

I uncurled myself and rolled onto my back. Smoke and despair brought blinding tears. Through the blur, I could see the outline of Ravana. The eight-pointed stars on either side of her were glowing beacons in the haze, brighter than real suns.

Without warning she pounced on me. Her mandibles tore my throat open and shoveled my blood down her gullet. I gurgled in agony and disgust as her proboscis darted out from between them and into my wound, and felt my innards melt as she belched digestive acids into —

I was awake again, on the floor of that unassuming little conference room, flailing and howling like a maniac. Lorelei tangoed with my spazzing limbs and shouted calming words.

"It's all right, Maurus! It's all right! You're out of it. You're here, you're back. It's over."

I kicked myself all the way back into the corner and became a ball. I wheezed and made shrill noises and muttered about horrible things that happened or would happen. Lorelei followed, but kept an unthreatening distance, cooing at me the way you would a panicked animal.

"It's okay, Maurus. It's over. You're out."

"What the *fuck*," were my first articulate words. "What the fuck is it? What the fuck was that?"

"I know," she agreed. "It's okay." She called over her shoulder to the medical guys behind the glass. "He's all right, it's fine. It's just his first time, that's all." The aides just stood there. It wasn't clear why she said anything. I had never seen more unconcerned faces. I wondered for a minute if they were even real people. Mr. Gray stood between them, equally expressionless, his arms still crossed. The stinkbug was no longer on the glass.

I yelped again as something came into my hands.

"It's okay," Lorelei soothed. "It's just your food. You'll need to eat now."

I ran my fingers over the styrofoam box, trying to remember what it was for.

"Eat?"

Lorelei smiled. Her teeth were so even and white, her lips full and pink and pretty and *human*. It was such a relief to see human beauty, after spending eons with a goddess-demon-bug, that I came more or less back to my senses.

"How long was I out?" I asked.

"Not long," she said. "Two or three seconds."

I almost launched my box of leftovers. “Two or three *seconds?*”

Her smile widened. “You thought it was longer.”

“Longer? It was *hours.* Maybe days.”

The smile vanished. In the dim, orange light, she looked achingly sad. “And it was quite an ordeal, wasn't it?”

She’d been through it too. Or an equivalent of it. It was written all over her eyes. I knew then that we had a bond. A wild one. I had just entered a world that, until then, Lorelei had felt totally alone in. It must have been crippling. The strangeness of alien land is so immense, so literally mind-shattering, that I simply couldn’t have imagined wandering it without someone else, someone to anchor you. How was she still so *sane?* Even graceful? This woman had a strength that was unfathomable to me.

I felt I should speak to it somehow, compliment her, tell her how much my respect for her had just skyrocketed. But of course, I couldn’t. I could only sit there and gawk at her.

“Where is he now?” I said, changing the subject before I could stop myself. “The alien.”

“*Ezekiel,*” Lorelei corrected, “is in his room.” She nodded at the door he’d walked through.

I looked at the door, this one windowless, steel. Gray. Imposing in its ugliness. Not at all homey. “That’s where he lives?”

“Mhm. He figured he gave you about as much as you could handle, for now. Start eating that, will you?” She tapped my box of leftovers and stood and put her hands on her hips. “What do you say we get started the day after tomorrow? Thoughts? You can take the next day and a half to process things and then we’ll get down to business.”

I began to stand—*very* slowly. Lorelei looped her arm in mine and steadied me. “A day and a half?” I asked.

She grimaced sympathetically. “I know. You’ll be ‘processing’ this the rest of your life. But Mr. Gray likes to keep a schedule.”

“I would say that’s a fair assessment,” I said. I looked at the glass partition and saw that Mr. Gray was no longer there. I thought of the stinkbug again. “Do the bugs bother Ezekiel at all?”

Lorelei raised an eyebrow. “Bugs?”

“Yeah. That huge stinkbug flew out of his room. Is that something you need to check out, or…?”

“Really?” She brightened with interest. “When?”

"You didn't see it? It was right before I passed out. As he was going back to his room, this stinkbug came and…" Her look stopped me. Polite and indulgent. The way you'd look at your grandma when she's spouting nonsense.

She pursed her lips, faking thoughtfulness for my sake. "Hm! I'll keep an eye out for it."

"I was faltering at the time," I explained. "And you were trying to keep me steady. So you must not have noticed it. It must still be in there, though. It landed right on the glass. And you said I was only out for a few seconds, so…" I stopped again. My need to explain myself was itself concerning.

She patted my shoulder. "I'll keep an eye out for it," she repeated, no less gently. "But you, sir, need to rest. And *eat,* damn it! You have big days coming, and I can't have you shriveling like a raisin."

My heart sank at the thought of "big days" with the alien. Today had been more than big enough. I didn't think I could take anymore.

But Lorelei kept me in it. The way she gazed at me. It contained something more than her usual warmness. I was someone to her now, in some way or another.

The front door opened and Mr. Gray poked his head inside. "We should be going

now. Get some rest, Mr. Maurus. Your orientation is complete."

Insanely enough, Bohm called me to his lab not two hours after I got back to my domicile. Read: I did not call him, he called me.

Okay. Nothing "insane" about that, you might say. It's just a coincidence.

There's that word again. *Coincidence.* I find myself clinging to it. Clinging isn't good. It implies desperation.

But I mean, a phone call from a friend *is* just a coincidence, right? Not even. It's just a thing that happens. To make any more of that is simple paranoia, isn't it?

Give me a minute here and we'll see.

Bohm was on me the second I got through the door. "Maurus!" He beamed and clasped my shoulders. His gray beard was so long and perky that it tickled my nose. I tried to twitch it away, but Bohm was oblivious. "Maurus. Buddy. Come look at this."

He pulled me through his lab and weaved us through the maze of beakers and flasks so quickly that I tensed up and tried to make myself small, worried I'd knock one over.

Tensing up didn't help because I did, in fact, knock one over. It fell and shattered, but

Bohm barely noticed. He kept pulling me along as I tried to apologize.

"Don't worry about it," he said, waving his hand. "I break twelve of them a day. Come on, quick!"

We reached the back of his lab, where a glass of clear fluid sat on a countertop beside a cage with two dead rats in it.

Bohm grinned and gestured at the rats. "What do you see here, my friend?"

I blinked. "I see death."

He gave a short bark of a laugh. "Yes, you do. What do you suppose caused it?"

I'd had a hearty lunch of processed pasta and taken a power nap before he called, but my brain was still cooked from Ezekiel and Ravana. I was in no condition for Bohm's wordplay. It was soothing to be around him though, with his unclouded brain. His ultra-sanity balanced out the shitfuck of insanity my life was becoming.

"Probably you did," I said. "This is why I refuse to take part in your experiments."

"Ah." He put a hand on his heart and patted my back. Only then did I notice that he was wearing a toga, like a Greek god. "You are astute," he said. "Very astute. Correct. These rats are dead because of me. Because I poisoned them."

My stomach lurched. "I'm sorry?"

Bohm couldn't have suspected the reason for my astonishment, because who could? He figured I was taking a simple scientific interest in what he'd said. "Yes! I poisoned them with your saucer fluid."

Just a coincidence, eh?

I was lightheaded. I leaned on his countertop.

Bohm grabbed my shoulders. "Jesus, are you all right? You're getting pale. More so than usual. Which is saying something."

"No, I'm fine, I've…Mr. Gray has some new work for me, and things are a little crazy and I'm tired and…what do you mean, poison?"

"Should you sit? Here, sit." He dragged a stool over. "I called you because I thought you'd be excited. Now I worry I'm giving you a stroke."

I tried to chuckle and be lighthearted. "I am excited. I've just had a long day. It's fine. What do you mean you poisoned them with the saucer fluid? You turned it to poison? It was one of your experiments?"

He watched me with concern. "Yes," he murmured, before his excitement returned. "Yes! Well, no. It wasn't an experiment. That's what's so interesting. I wonder if we may have finally found the natural state of this fluid." He took the glass, gazed lovingly at it, and moved it

to the other side of the countertop. “I left the fluid in an inert state the past couple days. I shut it into a safe. *Hermetically* sealed, brother. No foreign molecules could have tampered with it. But when I checked it again today, I discovered that it was *venom.*”

I stared at him. I was physically unable to respond.

“Venom!” He repeated. “It’s a colorless, odorless, and seemingly tasteless neurotoxin. And no, I didn’t drink it this time.” He laughed.

I kept staring. His toga gleamed white against his dark skin.

He stopped laughing and scowled. “I’m trying to tell you that you were right, man. I recall you ranting to me some weeks ago that this black saucer, you think, is more organic than technological. And no one would listen to you. Well, this would seem to vindicate your theory. This saucer carries a fluid that can adopt the properties of any substance. But its default state is venom.”

“What…what sort of venom?” I croaked.

He studied me. The man missed nothing. He knew I wasn’t just “tired.”

“It attacks the brain, primarily,” he said, his tone more mechanical than I’d ever heard it. “And it’s extremely fast-acting. Faster than I was ready for, and more potent. My poor rats

were dead before I could even make a proper study."

Words spewed from me, out of nowhere. I had no control over them. "Do you think I could take a few samples? I think Lorelei could use them."

He raised his eyebrows and brightened somewhat. "You're working with Lorelei now? Is that what has you so flummoxed? She is a brilliant little cookie. Hard to keep up with."

"Yeah, I've been assigned to her department. I wish I could tell you more than that. It's very strange stuff. Very strange. I think if I brought her some of this venom it could go a long way for her."

He combed his beard with his fingers. "Mmm…I could see how it might, I suppose. I did some work with her once. She had some truly boggling tissue samples. If you're right, and this black saucer of yours is really biological…hm…maybe she could crack it."

I had pulled my phone out as he was talking and pretended to text her. I didn't dare do it for real. We have no phone service down here, as such. We're all connected to a single network that Black Book provides, and can only message each other. They obviously read every word we type.

"I just sent her a message about it," I said, holding my phone vertically, so Bohm couldn't see the screen.

We waited for her "response" in strange silence. Something clicked on the other side of the lab, faint and rhythmic—the air conditioning, maybe. I tried to focus on the sound. It was the only thing to distract me from my guilt. To lie to Bohm, of all people, should have been a crime.

"Interesting," I exclaimed, squinting at my phone. "Okay. Lorelei says she would love to have two samples, please. One for eleven milligrams, the other for a single milligram. Would that be possible?"

He tilted his head. "Where did she get those figures? That's oddly specific."

I shrugged and pocketed my phone. "I've learned not to question her."

Bohm nodded and glanced at me. He grabbed the glass of venom. "Well, if it's what the doctor ordered." Thankfully he turned as he said that, so he couldn't see me wince. Why did he use that phrase? Why would he? He couldn't have known that this venom was truly going to *the* doctor. That Carnell may as well have ordered it through all his sketchy, slimy shenanigans.

Bohm walked to the other side of the lab to get the samples ready. I savored the moment

of aloneness. I needed time to spiral without anybody watching.

This was *impossible.* Let's review: In a vision, Ravana tells me to poison Carnell. Or rather, she convinces me. I *decide* to poison him. Moreover, I decide to enlist Bohm to synthesize the poison. Without his knowledge. We'll leave aside the fact that this makes me a giant unforgivable asshole for the time being.

A scant couple hours after the decision is made, Bohm just *happens* to discover that his favorite new toy, Ravana's fluid, has turned to poison. And he goes out of his way to call me in here to show it to me.

Can I really hide behind "coincidence" here? *Really?*

No. I can't. It's out of the question. Too many variables have come together too perfectly. So, we're left with two possibilities: either Ravana is literally *manipulating reality,* or *I am,* without realizing how or why I do it. I don't know which thought is more horrifying.

In some twisted way though, both these things might be true. Ravana insinuated that she is a part of me. We're somehow intertwined. I don't want to believe it, but it *feels* true. She is a distinct personality, no doubt, but she lives inside me. She's as much a part of me as my liver.

So what does that mean? Am I insane? I've been asking myself that a lot lately. But if I'm insane, then why is the universe *cooperating* with my delusions?

Does that mean reality itself is insane? That's not really better. How are we supposed to find a sense of meaning if the universe itself is totally batshit? It's like fish looking for "purpose" on dry land. As soon as they arrive, at the peak of their destiny, they die.

I'd been staring into the black, beady eyes of the rats, spinning out with these kinds of thoughts. Bohm's voice almost made me fall off my stool.

"You know," he said. "If you ever feel like you're in over your head, you can talk to me." He had just come back to the counter, setting down one tiny vial and what looked like a minuscule eye dropper. The thing was smaller than my pinky finger. "I mean, I'm not a shrink. And I'm not your daddy. But I know how easy it is to feel alone in this place. It can overwhelm. When it does, it's advisable to have someone to air things out with." He paused. "Or, at the very least, I do happen to be a chemist, so I could get you some good drugs."

Despite everything, I laughed. A real laugh. Only Bohm, the laughing sage, could

have made that happen. “Thank you. For now, I’ll just stick to the venom.” I held my hand out.

Bohm nodded, but he didn’t give it to me. He looked out the side of his deep, shadowy eyes and tapped the vial with his fingertip. “Maurus…I need you to promise me that this venom is not for you.”

“Me?” I laughed again. “No, no. I appreciate your concern, my friend. Truly. I promise, it’s just to help Lorelei. That’s all.”

He nodded again and handed me the samples. “All right, man. I believe you.”

I believe that he believed me. At least about the fluid not being for me. The bastard is immune to lies. His emotional intelligence is too high. He knew I wasn’t being entirely truthful in the grand scheme, but in this case, the “truth” was so incomprehensible that even he couldn’t put his finger on it.

No one can. That’s why they call it “madness.”

As I walked out of the lab, still reeling from my shattered conceptions of “reality,” Bohm called out. “Maurus! Don’t forget what I said. You’re not alone.”

I dreamed of the woman of fire again. When I got back from Bohm’s place I crashed. Hyper-

sleep for sixteen hours. I remember no other dreams but this one.

She was laying waste to an entire neighborhood. A once quaint suburb with well-kept lawns was reduced to ash, the flames so bright they turned night to day. All she had to do was glance at a house and it was a fireball. Her copper hair billowed wildly in the biting wind, and her eyes—those incredible amber eyes—were gleeful. That was the only expression on her face, with its deceivingly innocent and delicate features. If you didn't see the eyes, you'd think the destruction meant nothing to her, or that she simply had no feelings at all. But when you saw them, it was clear that she lived for it. She was the embodiment of rage unleashed. She was the Angel of Chaos.

Carnell, of all people, came running out of one of the few houses that was still standing. There was an old woman hobbling in the street, short, round and stocky. I hadn't noticed her before. I was witnessing all this from the outside, a disembodied third party.

Carnell wrapped himself around her and tried to shield her from death. The house he had just come out of exploded with blue flames that were savagely beautiful.

He screamed, and he and the old woman fell to their knees. The Angel was only a few

steps away from them now. They met in the middle of the road. Carnell raised a hand to her, whimpering and begging. With his other arm, he cradled the old woman even more tightly. The faintest of smiles moved over the Angel's face. Carnell's blubbering went quiet. He saw hope. For a few seconds, it did almost look like she would spare him.

But she wasn't an Angel of Mercy. In a second, Carnell and the old woman were engulfed in a blue inferno. The flames danced in a harmless ring around the Angel, while the flesh of Carnell and his loved one began to melt.

I woke up then, but Carnell's agonized screams were pounding in my ears for a full five minutes after. I didn't know how to feel about them.

The second time I killed, I was in Ukraine. My first assignment in hostile territory. An intelligence job. Paramilitary. Top secret, obviously. You probably know all about it.
I was dug in with a Ukrainian unit on the front lines, waiting for a chance to sneak into Russia. The Russians got to us first.
It was claustrophobic fighting. Urban chaos. Shots coming out of windows and little alleys you could barely fit in.
I was fucked. I had no cover. Bodies were already dropping. I froze.
Someone pulled me into a building. A young Ukrainian couple. They had a baby and an older girl, maybe four years old. They said I was safe now. They'd hide me in here until it was over. They smiled.
They were so happy. A perfect family. Even the baby smiled. Their country was blown to shit, and they were happy. They had each other.
At the time, I didn't know why I did it. I pulled out my side arm and dropped the parents. Hit them twice apiece, right through the eyes. The mother was holding the baby and dropped it. It started screaming.
The little girl was catatonic. Stared at me with drowning eyes. She'd never understand. For the rest of her life, she'd never understand.

But now, I *understand. In those final seconds, I was closer to that family than they ever were to each other.*

-From Session 4 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 04

I was working on the Jared Nauls story when I got the call. Things had been quiet. No sound but the rain.

I like the light of a grey day in my kitchen. One small window over the sink is just enough for it to wash in. Only time I like those dull green countertops. Cloudy days mingle with them, make the room a sad painting. Perfect vibe to write in.

It's coming along, the Nauls story. Better than usual. I have a real flow with this one. Here's my favorite part:

The family man kisses his daughter goodnight.
She's asleep and doesn't feel it.
He goes to work and sits down. Daughter wakes up alone.
The family man goes home to a dark house.
Another unknown kiss.
Weeks pass between the cluttered desk and quiet house. Months turn to years.
The family man gazes at the picture on his desk.
Daughter smiles back.

It's poetry. The whole thing, not just the words. I feel like I *know* this guy, better than I've known my other kills. I'm getting better at this.

Dolion would laugh. "Why don't you just pull his file if you're so curious about him?" Fuckhead. That's exactly what he would say. I can *hear* him saying it. He's a gorilla. Simple. He makes my blood boil and that makes me horny.

"Just pull his file." Shut up, fuckhead. I'll pull something for you. It isn't about *reading.* What can you learn about a person from a file? You might as well "pull" their tax records. Dumbass. That isn't the way to a soul.

Anyway, the call came around noon. Mr. Gray's face showed up on my phone. I tried not to cringe. He's hard to look at. Doesn't make sense. You can't get a grip on who he is. His eyes tell you nothing. Just black pits. I don't know what ethnicity he is. He doesn't fit one. What kind of family could he have come from? Doesn't seem like he could have come from any. Scary shit. How are you supposed to figure out a person with no relationships?

"Arae, my darling," he said. "The clock has struck midnight for another soul."

Dude really talks like that. Sounds like a snake. Or a demon. His voice *slithers* out of his throat.

I hoped I sounded casual. “Who’s the target?”

“One who betrayed my trust. He enjoyed privileges and freedoms uncommon to our agency. He had an accident, and now wishes to throw it all away. He makes veiled demands. I suspect trickery. Only the ungrateful resort to trickery. Ungratefulness disgusts me.”

He didn’t sound disgusted. Didn’t sound anything. What would a snake sound like if it talked? You wouldn’t hear emotion. Not until it bites you. How do you make sure it doesn’t? What language do you defend yourself with?

“Name and location?” I squeaked.

“I will send his name and other details presently. You will have detailed files. For now, you must make ready to fly. You are coming home, my dear.”

“To Utah?” Mr. Gray works out of Utah. No one knows where exactly.

He almost smiled. A ghost of a smile. I couldn’t believe it. “That’s correct. I’d like to have your talents close by, for a time. You have proven adept at gathering information. We suspect your new mark has infected some of his peers with sensitive information. I’d like you to find out the extent of the outbreak. Who has he spoken to about us, and what has he told them?”

I nodded. “I understand.” I was a little bummed. Sounded like this could turn into a long operation. How long until I could get back to Dolion, my favorite headache?

“Excellent,” Mr. Gray hissed. “Travel arrangements and target information are being emailed. We shall look forward to having you.”

“Thank you, sir.” The call ended. The rain ended. There was nothing but the echo of his voice.

I drummed my fingers on the table for a minute. Shrugged. “Well,” I mumbled. “There it is.” I folded up the paper I’d been writing on and brought it to the bedroom.

I keep a thick folder under the bed with everything I’ve written about my kills. I call it the Red Book. I pulled it out and added the Nauls story to it.

I could hear Dolion laughing again. “Why do you write it on paper? What fuckin’ century are we in?”

Stupid fuckhead. He doesn’t get it. He likes what we do, but he doesn’t understand the intimacy of it. He brings back trophies for me, not him. Because it will get me off. Dolion gets off on getting me off. That’s it.

If he really knew what we were doing, he wouldn’t ask me to pull files, or to stop physically writing.

The point is to *know* the person. You can't know a person through files. Files are collections of facts. They're trivia. They don't put you in people's heads.

Talking is better, but it's not ideal. People wear masks. Conversations are emotional duels. Words are weapons. We use weapons to get what we want and can't ask for.

Not one fucking thing is more honest than death. When you kill someone, they don't get to pretend. They are themselves, finally, unmasked. Even if it's only for half a second. A millisecond of truth tells you more than a million lies. And you never forget the truth.

That's where Dolion's mistake is. He thinks we're in the killing business. We aren't. When I add someone to the Book, I give them eternal life. Their truth, their personhood, imprints on me forever. I'm a collector of souls. But one day I'll be dead too. So I need to leave a record. I'd rather use pen and paper than have to stare at a fucking screen. A screen is just an electronic mask.

I slid the Red Book back under the bed and started to pack. Soon, it would get a little thicker. The thought made me wet. But not with lust. It was the lube of fertility. It was the pull of creation—of everlasting life.

I gasped. Maybe, I realized, the only way to get Dolion to understand would be to add him to the Book.

If that's what it would take to make him see, I'd do it. He'd thank me with his last breath. In his final moment, he'd experience intimacy like nothing else in the universe.

Yes. Alice. My mother's name is Alice. I told you, she works in biotech. She's a low-level biologist. Again with my mother. Is this because of that stuff I said at the beginning? It's not like it was a huge deal. There are far worse mothers to have, and far worse mommy issues.

I think she was just bitter, that's all. Working in a biotech firm might seem like a big deal to most people, but she's never really made a name for herself there. She's never moved up. She's pretty mediocre, as far as scientists go.

I was anything but mediocre. That was clear early on, and she didn't like it.

-From Session 6 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 06

Ravana was right. Carnell skipped a day, then came back to attack Lorelei.

I made sure to meet Lorelei in the cafeteria anyway, on the day that Carnell was predicted to "hide in his shame." I'm not in the habit of blindly trusting otherworldly visions. I had to know she'd be safe.

She saw me waiting in line for coffee and gave me a look of clinical disapproval. Before heating up her oatmeal, she scuttled over to me. "Really, Maurus? Coffee? This is supposed to be your day of rest. Coffee is not a beverage of rest."

"Sorry." I shrugged. "I'm a creature of habit. I didn't think about it."

Her mouth became a line. "Men! There's nothing wrong with a little self-care, you know. I bet you'll go tinker with your saucer toys after this as well. Hmm?"

"No, I…well…probably, yes."

She laughed. I wished I could claim credit for being funny, but it was inadvertent. "Well, I wish you wouldn't," she said. "I'm not your boss, and I'm not your mother. But I am a biologist, and I know that your brain needs rest.

It's like a muscle that's been pulled in a new way for the first time. It needs to heal before you stretch it again."

I blushed, for some reason. "Perhaps I could just have a quick breakfast, and then do some light reading."

She beamed. "Better! Throw in some napping too. A lot of napping."

I nodded. "Fair enough. I suppose I should skip the coffee, then. Shall we get a table?"

"Ah," she swooned. "Music! If you really skip the coffee and promise you'll go to bed after, then yes, I would love to get a table."

I went and ordered some French toast from the kiosks. There are no cooks down here. They all work topside and fill our meal orders via dumbwaiter. I'm not kidding. You think Black Book would let a bunch of peasant chefs traipse around their favorite bunker?

So, I had to wait for my food to come down, all the way in the back of the room. That was not a very "restful" experience. I was miles from the door, light-years. Carnell could have barreled in at any second.

Predictably, the microwave where Lorelei heats up her oatmeal is on the other side of the room too. I don't know who designed this place.

My hand was crammed in my pocket, fingers cramped around my vial of venom. My eyes kept flicking from Lorelei to the door. If he came in, I'd have to make some mad dash to get to him. It would be dramatic. It wouldn't exactly scream "low profile."

But, thankfully, it didn't happen. Ravana told the truth. Lorelei and I got our food and shared a quiet meal together that probably would have been delightful, had my mind been even slightly functional. I made sure to sit facing the door, but he never came through.

Talk was sparse. I got the sense Lorelei didn't want to encourage it, given her insistence on my rest. And since I never initiate conversation, we ate mostly in silence. There were probably a few casual quips, but I can't remember them.

After breakfast, she left. Without my coffee fix, napping was surprisingly easy. My nerves had calmed, knowing she was down in M-5, where Carnell couldn't get to her.

The next morning though, my head was battered by caffeine withdrawal. Anxiety likely made it worse. I don't do confrontation well. Let alone poisoning. But both of these things were likely to happen within the hour.

I got to the cafeteria earlier than usual, hoping that getting my fix would help me focus.

The happy lights were more unhappy than they'd ever been. I actually hissed when I walked in the room. I thought they would crack my head in half. The coffee line was shorter this time of day, but not by much. I had to endure at least ten minutes of cranial pounding while I waited.

My first swig of coffee dulled half my pain, almost immediately. I still felt like I'd fought with a hammer, but I could think again. More or less. I sat at my usual table and faced the door. The waiting game began. One of my technicians was sitting at a table near the door. He kept looking at me. I avoided eye contact.

Lorelei walked in and my heart spasmed. I reached into my pocket, felt the vial. The night before, I'd checked a hundred times that I had the right dose. Somehow I was still paranoid I had mixed them up.

Lorelei looked at me and smiled, her oatmeal bowl tucked in one hand. She took the bag of oatmeal with the other and went to the microwave. I tried to give her some sort of look in response. I couldn't tell you what. Something that approximated cheerfulness, I hoped. It probably looked monstrous. She tore open the packet and poured oatmeal in her bowl and added some water from the sink.

Carnell walked in right when the microwave started, like he could smell it. He strutted in with his personal coffee, steaming and fresh, tanned head held high. He headed straight for her and made a point of frowning.

A fresh pulse of migraine stabbed my eye. The blood in my brain had turned to needles. I pumped my leg spastically under the table. Sweat beaded on my eyelashes. I didn't want to do this. But I wanted more than anything *to have done it.*

It wasn't time though. Not yet. I had to wait for my moment. I kept eyeballing that little black camera above them, planning how to mask my movements from it.

Carnell set his elite, fancy mug on the counter and propped his elbow up in front of it. He turned his back on it, as always.

There. That was my opening.

I stood up. My legs shook. I pulled the vial out of my pocket and closed my fingers around it. Carnell and the microwave seemed more distant than usual. The room stretched from here to there.

I took my first steps toward them, taking a wide angle. Carnell was too focused on Lorelei (and too stupid) to notice me, so long as I didn't do anything blatant. But my technician was watching.

Why was he staring at me? No one shows any signs of life in that cafeteria until the day I decide to poison someone.

All this time, Carnell had been staring with dramatic, superior disapproval at Lorelei. He hadn't said a word yet. He was like an elementary school teacher trying to be intimidating.

Lorelei finally gave in and glanced at him. "Yes, doctor?"

I completed my long curve and was safely behind Carnell's line of sight. It was a straight line to Carnell's mug now, as direct as I could hope for. But my technician was sitting right in the middle of that line. And he was still fucking looking at me.

Carnell raised an accusing finger and tapped the air with it. "*You* have been very rude to me," he told Lorelei.

Lorelei's response was simple. "Have I?" Or something like that. I couldn't make it out precisely, because my technician started *talking* to me.

"Ay, Maurus! We missed ya in the hangar the last couple days."

Small talk. Today, and no other day, someone was making small talk in the cafeteria. Why does the universe *conspire* to be as annoying as possible?

"I've been training," I muttered. I turned to the coffee machine and tried to look casual, like I was checking out the line. I perked my ears and listened for Carnell.

"…me on," I heard him say. "Like I was on a string. You've been toying—"

"Training?" My technician interrupted. I wanted to scream at him to shut up, but that wouldn't have helped me. "What kinda training is there in the UFO business? I thought we've all just been winging it."

"…never asked for your attention," I heard Lorelei say. Her voice was tense.

"Well, I need to be filled in on updates from topside," I lied to my tech. "You know very well technology is always evolving."

"…the way you look at me, so don't play that game." Carnell was collected, but there was menace rising in his tone.

"You all right there, jumpy?" My technician asked me. "What are you looking for?"

"…away from me, please." Lorelei said sternly. Carnell was bearing down on her, his back to his coffee. The situation was developing. I was running out of time.

"I'm just…" I strained my ears, but whatever Carnell said, it was too quiet to make

out. “Uh.” I glanced at my technician. “I’m just indecisive.”

“Get. Away. From. Me. Please.” Lorelei said.

“Indecisive about…coffee?” My tech laughed. “Looked like you already got your cup.”

Carnell grabbed Lorelei’s arm. She ripped it away and glared up at him. “If you touch me again,” she said, “I will scream.”

That was it. I couldn’t wait any longer. I told my technician, “I need more cream,” then tromped over to Carnell. Adrenaline made me lithe and quick. In a single, smooth motion, I brought my left hand behind my back, slid two fingers into my right fist, and twisted the cap off the vial.

The microwave beeped as I reached the counter. Carnell was laughing, trying to pass off his behavior as a joke. “You’re too easy!” He said. “You must fall for everything.”

I kept my fist closed over the vial, so the camera wouldn’t see. I pretended to reach over his mug, stopping above it for half a second. I heard the poison plop into the coffee, then rolled the vial under three fingers and combed through the sugar, cream and cinnamon with my pointer and my thumb.

Lorelei had brought her oatmeal out and set it on the counter. As she reached for her spoon, Carnell took the bowl and grabbed a packet of cinnamon from the tray. His meaty hand came within inches of mine. I quickly plucked some creamer and started back to the table. Lorelei was fuming in silence while her bowl was held hostage.

"Allow me," Carnell said, tearing open the cinnamon and stirring it in. "Consider this my atonement. I didn't mean to upset you. I was just kidding around."

I got back to the table just as Carnell released the captive oatmeal. Lorelei snatched it so quickly that a little spilled over the edge. She walked away without a word.

Carnell waved at her back. "Until next time!" He called, turning and grabbing his mug.

It all hit me then. Ravana had said Carnell would "attack" today, for "vengeance." My veins went cold. The cinnamon! Carnell's ritual cinnamon. *He was going to poison her.*

Obviously, I couldn't let her eat it. But how could I tell her without revealing what I'd done? Maybe there was some way to explain it, but everything happened too fast and I didn't have time to think.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and barreled toward her, pretending to be absorbed

in some text. Still shaken by Carnell's harassment, Lorelei was also paying little attention, her eyes fixed to the white floor tiles. I closed the distance between us in two seconds and crashed into her sidelong. I threw my left arm out, as if for balance, and knocked her bowl out of her grip. Most of the molten oatmeal missed her, flying in an impressive wave and splattering against the near wall. But a blob of it landed on the sleeve of her sweatshirt—a steaming smear about as long as my hand was now burning her upper arm.

The bowl clattered on the floor and Lorelei yelped and hissed. She pulled the burning cloth up off her skin and held it there, gingerly pulling her arm out of the sleeve. Tears of pain and frustration welled out of her eyes.

"Oh my god!" I cried. "I'm so stupid! Damn it, I'm sorry, I'm so…god, are you okay?"

Her stained, empty sleeve dangling at her side, she rushed into the bathrooms, heaving a single, tired sob that broke my heart. But I was exhilarated. I had done it. I had actually *done* it.

"Nice going, scrawny!" Carnell laughed from the other side of the cafeteria and raised his mug to me. "Smooth!"

That killed my celebration. Why was he laughing? If I had just foiled his plot, he'd have been more upset. I knew he was too simple to

control his emotions. And he showed no signs of disappointment.

Fuck! Had he not really poisoned her? Was Ravana deliberately misleading me, or did I simply read into her message too much?

Normally, I would have fallen into an existential crisis. But then, Carnell brought his mug up to his lips and drank. It wasn't like he gulped the entire thing, but it wasn't some delicate little sip either. It was a good, solid swig of poisoned coffee.

My mind had never been so silent. I noticed nothing but the sights, sounds and smells of the room. Even my migraine vanished. All of my senses were calibrated to anticipate. It was a primal feeling, like a hunter watching prey wander into a trap.

Carnell took two steps toward the door and grimaced. Another step, and he clutched his chest with his free hand. He coughed once, then took a wheezing breath. One more step—his arm stretched out in front of him, as if he was toasting with his mug. His legs twisted underneath him and he swayed to the side, like a ballerina. As he finally collapsed, his outstretched arm stiffened, so that the momentum of his fall brought it over his head. The rest of his coffee was dumped on his head and neck.

Despite being a sizable man, he didn't land too hard. All his muscles must have clenched, because the mug stayed locked in his grip and shattered against the floor. He lay there, holding the jagged remains of the handle like some final offering.

I was paralyzed. Other people in the cafeteria gasped and shouted. Several of them got their phones out and summoned guards through the emergency app. But I was too awed to move.

I had vague concerns that the poison had actually killed him. That's not what was supposed to happen. But he didn't look good. I couldn't imagine he was breathing.

This was a distant concern, though. It was speck-like, babyish, compared with the growing sense that I was warping reality. A week prior, I *vividly* imagined Carnell's hot coffee being dumped over his head and incapacitating him. Now, here was Carnell, on the ground, incapacitated, with a head full of hot coffee. How could he have fallen like that? What is the anatomical likelihood? I'm not a doctor, but it doesn't seem like a thing that should have happened.

I need to know what I'm becoming. What sort of power is this, and how do I learn to control it?

The guards arrived suspiciously quickly, as always. Two of them. They tend to come in pairs. Wordless, robotic people. They might *be* robots. They dress in impeccable black suits and wear sunglasses. *Sunglasses*, down here. Maybe they think they're in a movie. Or perhaps the happy lights are so offensive to them that they're trying to block them out. I guess I could appreciate that.

In not even a minute, they strapped Carnell to a gurney and rolled him away. They left the mess of coffee and mug shards for us to clean. It was all painfully ordinary for them. If there were ever a day in this place where some poor researcher, in some lab or another, didn't pass out from toxic fumes, or exotic radiation, or some kind of sonic pulse, I'd think something was wrong. Half of the workload for these guards consists of carting half-maimed scientists to the surface for medical attention.

After a few minutes of staring dumbstruck at the puddle of Carnell's coffee, my brain began to turn on again. Lorelei emerged from the bathroom just as I finished rebooting. The sleeve of her sweater, which had been a vibrant pink, now had a blotchy dark stain smeared over it. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she seemed refreshed, as is often the result of a good cry.

"My *god,*" I erupted when I saw her. "I am so sorry. Are you all right? I can't believe how stupid that was. Did it burn you? That was so *singularly* stupid of me, I can't believe—"

By then she had reached me. She touched my shoulder and smiled warmly. "It's okay, Maurus. It was an accident."

"But it must have been scalding! Are you okay?"

"Eh, I got my arm out in time. It's a first degree burn at worst. I'm not even blistering."

"Not even blistering! Jesus. Well, I still feel like shit about it. Can I buy you another breakfast, at least? Something special. Is there any special breakfast you like? Something sentimental that you don't get often? I always assumed the oatmeal was utilitarian."

She giggled. There was a new glint in the blues of her eyes. Probably, she was as surprised by this easy outpouring of words as I was. I was effusive. Socially engaged. This was a side of me neither of us had seen before.

"No, no, it's fine," she insisted. She nodded toward the debris from Carnell, a streak of happy light making her black hair almost purplish. "What happened there?"

I gave her a wild look. "Carnell happened. It was crazy, you wouldn't believe it. He shouted at me after I tried to burn your face

off. *Jeered,* you know? So, I was looking right at him. He turned to leave and then out of nowhere he started coughing and grabbing his chest. Then he just collapsed. Nuts. It looked like he had a heart attack or something. But that isn't my field."

"Oh." She withdrew a bit, furrowed her brows. It was an interesting reaction. I don't often have trouble reading people—*reading* them is all I do—but it was hard to pinpoint what she was feeling. I wondered if part of her was happy, or relieved to hear about Carnell, and another part was disgusted by this reaction. She had that pensive look that comes with an inner battle. But maybe I was just projecting.

"Are you okay?" I pressed.

"Oh yeah, I'm just…" she made herself smile. "It's just strange. It's been a strange morning."

"I've had several strange mornings lately."

She laughed again and studied me. I also studied me. I was almost…*confident.* And my behavior reflected it. Neither of us knew what to make of this.

"Well look, I'd really like to buy you breakfast," I told her. "Please. Or something, let me do *something* for you. I feel like an asshat."

"No, no." She pulled out her phone and glanced at it. "We don't have much time anyway. We need to go see Ezekiel. I'll stop by my domicile and get changed real quick. I'll grab a snack or something there. Want to come with? It's on the way."

"Sure. Might as well." It astounded me how casual I sounded. Lorelei had just invited me to her domicile.

On the way, I walked behind her. My body was convulsing, in a good way. I was exhilarated. High on adrenaline. Not because Lorelei was taking me home—she really only invited me for logistical reasons. No, my limbs were spazzing because I'd *won.* I took down Carnell, and by all indications, I had gotten away with it. I'd never done anything like this. I was *new.* Changed. I felt fuller, somehow. More human. I realized, as an afterthought, that I still didn't know if Carnell was alive. He might have been dead, and I didn't care. Was that immoral? Or was it simply human?

I had calmed myself to functional levels by the time we reached Lorelei's domicile. I waited in her living room while she changed. It was far cozier than mine. She had actual decorations. There were colorful rugs, a couch and end tables, artwork on the walls. It was

homey, unlike my place, which was basically an electronics shop with a bed.

On one of her end tables was a picture of two women. They had their arms around each other. I picked it up and scrutinized it and saw that one of them was Lorelei. Her hair was shorter than now, curling just under her chin. The other woman was a little shorter, her hair a lighter brown. But they had similar features. The same winter morning eyes.

Lorelei came out and caught me. “That’s my sister,” she explained. My suspicions were confirmed.

I quickly put the picture back where I found it. “I’m sorry. I got nosy.”

“That’s all right. If it was a secret I wouldn’t have it out in the living room.” She had swapped her stained pink sweater for a black one.

“You must be close with her?”

I figured this was a mundane question. That was small talk, right? Did I do it wrong? I didn’t think so, but the question seemed to disturb her. She frowned and rubbed her arms, as if she were cold. After a moment, she went into the kitchen. She didn’t say anything. No bubbly jokes. Not even one of her sunshine smiles.

I was terrified I'd hurt her. Maybe the picture didn't belong in the living room after all. Maybe she forgot what having guests was like, after all this time in The Underground.

When she came out of the kitchen, granola bar in hand, her classic smile reassured me. But she didn't answer my question.

"Ezekiel awaits!" Was all she said.

It's all about family. You want me to be your enforcer? Your silencer? That's where it starts. Every rebellion is a family issue. Some pencil pusher threatens to leak information for "ethical" reasons. A violation of his "principles." He's "standing up for what's right."
Don't believe him. Deep down, with every dissent, your employees are shaking their fists at mommy or daddy, a brother or sister. Maybe an old fuck that went bad.
It comes down to whoever meant the most to them and never loved them back.

-From Session 5 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 05

This kill is gonna be juicy. I copied some files into this journal. I'm not supposed to do that, but I need to. It's for posterity.

Subject name is Dr. Miles Carnell. He was head physician at M-Facility. Super secret research base. I didn't even know it was real until I got these files. Dolion's heard rumors about it, but they're all vague and stupid. UFO conspiracy theory bullshit.

People are dumb. Black Book keeps you in a box. All your work is need-to-know. When you run a business like that, people spout wild folk tales. Me and Dolion are just protecting military secrets. That's what we do. M-Facility is probably just a testing site for crazy high-tech shit.

Still cool to know it exists, though.

Anyway, this Carnell guy had a heart attack. Almost died. Now he's using it to try and get out of his contract. Apparently he saw the light and heard angels singing or whatever. Now he's a changed man.

Kinda funny. Look at this shit. It's a transcript of a conversation he had with Mr.

Gray in the infirmary. I guess every room in M-Facility is bugged…

Mr. Gray: Mr. Carnell, I'd like to ensure I have understood you correctly. You believe our report of your medical incident to be inaccurate?

Carnell: No. Your report is medically correct. But it's wrong about the cause of the incident.

Mr. Gray: By all means, enlighten me.

Carnell: The report says "*Myocardial Infarction due to a coronary artery spasm, likely brought on by stress.*" My heart attack wasn't brought on by stress, man. It was the exact opposite.

Mr. Gray: And what do you define as the opposite of stress?

Carnell: [pause]. Beauty.

Mr. Gray: If medical leave is what you seek, Mr. Carnell, you will need to elaborate. "Beauty" is not a prognosis I am familiar with.

Carnell: I saw it, man. I don't know why it happened, or how it happened. I was in the

cafeteria, doing my rounds. Like any old day. I took a drink of coffee and then I was just—**[claps]** *out,* bro. I was snapped the fuck out of my body.

Mr. Gray: Aha. And in this out of body experience, you beheld Beauty itself?

Carnell: I saw creation. I saw the beginning of time. I saw my whole life, front to back. I saw how it will end. I saw that nothing matters **[laughs].** It's like a painting, dude. The universe is a painting in progress, like one of those abstract paintings where you just splatter that shit all over the place. It's that kind of meaningless, you know? It was so beautiful… that gorgeous pointlessness…I was so blown away by it that I couldn't take it. My body actually couldn't contain the amazement. So I went into cardiac arrest.

Mr. Gray: This, truly, is your contention? In your professional, medical opinion, you believe your heart attack was caused by a sense of mystical astonishment?

Carnell: One hundred percent.

Mr. Gray: …

Carnell: It's all right, man. I knew you wouldn't believe me. I saw that too, when I was out. I'm telling you dude, I saw all this. I saw that look you're giving me right now. You think I've cracked.

Mr. Gray: That is not the terminology I would use.

Carnell: Well, whatever. Whatever you want to say. But you weren't there, and I was. My heart attack came *second.* The beauty of creation came first.

Mr. Gray: And you believe these are sufficient grounds for such a premature termination of your contract?

Carnell: No, but I know you're gonna do it anyway.

Mr. Gray: Interesting, and why is that?

Carnell: Because you want to kill me.

Mr. Gray: Oh come now, Mr. Carnell.

Carnell: It's *Doctor* Carnell, actually, and in my medical opinion, I am unwell. I saw my life laid out in front of me, front to back, dude. I saw how it's gonna end. I didn't want to come back into this body. I wanted to stay out there. But I came back because there's some things I need to make right. Apologies to make and whatnot. Now, do I sound like I'm all there right now? Are these the words of a well-adjusted person?

Mr. Gray: Mmm. Perhaps we could obviate your contract in the interest of mental health, provided you seek out the assistance you need. And you can be assured we'll keep our eyes on your progress, Mr. Carnell. We want you to be well. We are deeply invested in your well-being, and will monitor your health with utmost care.

Carnell: You're so gracious **[kissing noise].** An angel, I'd say. Thank you sir.

After that, Carnell went home to his parents' place. Cozy house. Quiet, upper-middle class suburb of Salt Lake City. I am now posted there, in a car, watching from a few houses down.

Broke in last night while everyone was in bed. Carnell snores like a god damn grizzly

bear. Found his room quick and saw a civilian cell phone on his nightstand.

Naughty naughty. M-Facility employees aren't allowed to have civilian phones. I guess he's not as stupid as he looks, or Black Book would have known about it. It must not be connected to his name, or any aspect of his real identity.

I texted IT and had them scan my phone's Bluetooth for nearby devices. Stood there watching his silhouette breathe, up and down. They found his phone through that and hacked in.

Love those tech nerds. This phone is a gold mine of gossip. There are messages dating back months. His primary contact has been a mysterious woman he calls "Alice." *Bonkers* conversations. I bet the good doctor Carnell would prefer to keep them secret. Allow me to share…

Monday, Feb 20, 8:47 PM

Carnell: Got something for ya.

Alice: This one had better be worth it.

Carnell: Baby, you can trust me on this one lol. It'll be worth it.

Alice: You will not talk to me like that.

Carnell: I talk to you how I want. That's the deal.

Alice: I advise you not to push me. I will not hesitate to terminate the deal.

Carnell: You won't, hmm?? Who's doing who the favor here?

Alice: Who indeed? There is a reason you should seek an arrangement like ours to satisfy your needs, despite the abundance of lower-risk alternatives online. Or on the street corners.

Carnell: Christ. What is that supposed to mean?

Alice: It means that what I provide for you has roots in ego, not lust. You get off on having something that someone else needs, because in your core, you know you are not needed by anyone. So, I ask you: who IS doing whom the favor here?

Carnell: You're a fucking ice queen.

Alice: There's the charm. Now, you will meet me tomorrow at precisely noon, at the location we agreed upon. And if what you have to offer is unsatisfactory, I will seek out other arrangements.

Carnell: Not noon. 1.

Alice: It's noon or nothing, doctor.

Carnell: FINE. Controlling bitch.

Alice: Careful.

Monday, Feb 27, 6:13 PM

Alice: Well Miles, it shocks me to say it, but your assistance has been most invaluable. Your information has exceeded my expectations. I have made more progress with my research in the past week than in the preceding five years. Do you have an ongoing relationship with your source?

Carnell: Yeah, she's kinda like you. Snooty biologist with a cold shoulder.

Alice: Perhaps she is simply immune to your charms.

Carnell: Don't get funny on me. Don't bite the hand that feeds.

Alice: You bit first. But no matter. You can obtain copies of her data with relative ease, yes?

Carnell: I mean, "relative" is the key word there, but yeah. I have access to all the levels of the facility but the lowest one. Most people don't have that much access.

Alice: I'm so proud.

Carnell: Don't get sarcastic. What I'm saying is I can get pretty routine with checking out her lab. Making sure everything is up to code. It's part of my job anyway. They taught me how to audit facilities that have direct medical implications. Obviously they don't want to hire some outside firm for that.

Alice: I frankly don't care about any of this. I don't care how you obtain her data, only that you obtain it. If you can reliably do that, then you and I may have an arrangement that will be fruitful for the foreseeable future.

Carnell: Yes. I can reliably do that.

Alice: Splendid. Then I will see you in a week.

…the next few months were pretty boring. Looks like Carnell and Alice fell into an easy routine of scandal. Their texts were mainly about scheduling meet-ups and little minor details. Let's skip ahead to when it gets interesting again…

Monday, Jun 03, 11:41 AM

Carnell: Problem.

Alice: Oh dear.

Carnell: Yeah. The bitch is never in her lab anymore. They've got her working down in M-5, and I don't have access.

Alice: Problem indeed. What do you intend to do about it?

Carnell: I can only ever get to her in the cafeteria in the morning. When she's eating breakfast. I'm trying to strike up a friendship with her.

Alice: God help us.

Carnell: Yeah, well, it's not easy! I told you, she's an ice queen too. So what the fuck am I supposed to do about this?

Alice: You're a bright man. Use your head. It sounds like she got a promotion. Is there really NOBODY tending to her prior work?

Carnell: I mean yeah, obviously there are other people doing it, but they aren't as good as her. I lifted their data the past couple weeks and you kept whining about how shitty it was.

Alice: Ah, yes.

Carnell: Ah yes is right. So what do I do?? The bitch won't talk to me.

Alice: I suggest you try harder.

Carnell: Oh. What a brilliant idea. How didn't I think of it? How, exactly, do you recommend? Should I put a gun to her head, right in the middle of breakfast? Make a scene while she's making oatmeal? Brilliant. What a low profile that would be.

Alice: They wouldn't give you a gun.

Carnell: Fuck off.

Alice: There are subtler ways to threaten, Miles.

Carnell: I told you not to call me that.

Alice: I will not call you "doctor" when we're off the clock. Miles.

Carnell: Jesus. What are you suggesting?

Alice: Well, it seems you have access to her food.

Carnell: Uh. Sort of lol. Indirectly.

Alice: How difficult would it be to put something in it?

Carnell: The fuck good would that do? If she's dead, you get no data!

Alice: Not enough to kill her, you ingrate. I thought you were a doctor. Use your THROBBING acumen and think of something. Induce in her a condition that only you can cure. Provide said cure only if she provides the data I need.

Carnell: Bro this is getting craaazzzyyyyyyy.

Alice: How so?

Carnell: That's too much. It's not worth it.

Alice: Not worth it? From what I can see I provide you a satisfaction that is quite singular and inimitable.

Carnell: Yeah but the price of anything can get too high.

Alice: The price of not doing it could be higher.

Carnell: …what the jolly Christ does that mean?

Alice: I've amassed a great deal of information about you, Miles Carnell. Some might call it criminal information. If your superiors found out what you have been doing, I take it they would not react very kindly.

Carnell: You have GOT to be fucking KIDDING!!!

Alice: Get me more data.

Carnell: Listen you crusty old whore. If you implicate me, you implicate yourself. So I know you're fucking bluffing.

Alice: Am I?

Carnell: Yep. And I can find me another cougar who's lower maintenance. We had a good run. But now you're asking too much of me.

Alice: I am on the verge of scientific immortality. I stand at the very cusp. Soon I will be the female Darwin. But without the data from your little girlfriend, I will once again be nobody. What do you suppose I would have left to live for?

You think I will hesitate to “implicate” myself, having already been exposed as a fraud? When I would have nothing left to lose?

Carnell: Don’t you have kids and shit?! What is wrong with you? Are you a fucking psychopath??

Alice: Ah, yes. Two ungrateful sons who never speak to me. I don’t even know where they are or what they do. Oh, and of course, the ex-husband who contents himself with mediocrity. Indeed, how could I throw all that away?

Carnell: I can’t IMAGINE why your kids wouldn’t speak to you, you miserable cunt. I can’t BELIEVE you’re doing this to me.

Alice: It almost sounds as if you were foolish enough to care for me. I detect a sense of betrayal in your tone.

Carnell: FUCK YOU!! You should just kill yourself, you heartless bitch!!

Alice: Get me more data, and I won’t have to. We can write all this off as a misunderstanding.

And our arrangement can continue. I know that is what you want.

Carnell: NOT ANYMORE.

Alice: No?

Carnell: Not enough for this. I don't want to do it. If I get caught working your scheme, the consequences will be just as bad as if you rat me out.

Alice: You'll only have to do it once. Then she'll be wrapped around your finger. You'll be needed again. I know that, too, is what you want. As for consequences, I suppose you'll have to ask yourself who you fear more - your superiors, or me?

[There was a pause here for about fifteen minutes.]

Alice: Still there, dear Miles?

Carnell: Fine. You win. I'll get your precious data.

Alice: That's a good boy. Get back to me when you have it.

Yesterday, 4:14 PM

Carnell: Good news.

Alice: You did it?

Carnell: I did what I had to. When can we meet?

Alice: You have my data?

Carnell: I have what you need. I want to see you again.

Alice: How touching.

Carnell: How about it? Can we meet?

Alice: Very well, doctor. If you truly have what I need, I will have what you need. Arrive at our spot at the usual time, day after tomorrow.

Carnell: See you then. :)

…That’s the last of their texts. I’m so invested. This case is delicious. Tomorrow I will follow Carnell to his meeting with Alice. I need to meet this woman. She could be my new hero.

When my mother was angry with me, she ignored me. She pretended I didn't exist.
I remember one night when I was maybe seven or eight. I spent hours following her, pulling at the legs of her pants, screaming and wailing. I was begging for her to acknowledge me, to react somehow *to my presence. I would even have accepted a slap in the face.*
But she never did. She cleaned the house, watched TV, went about her business. Like I wasn't even there. I resorted to throwing toys at her. She caught, deflected, or dodged them, without even a word or a glance in my direction.

-From Session 7 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 07

Ezekiel had taken the form of a proper “alien.” He sat at his little conference table, waiting for us in the cavern-like darkness of his room.

As soon as I walked in, I felt him stretch my consciousness, like skin spread apart in surgery. By “consciousness,” I mean *everything*—all the things I saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched, every thought in my head, every emotion in my heart. All of it was amplified by Ezekiel’s presence.

It hurt. My temples throbbed and threatened to explode. I covered them with my hands, as if that would do anything.

Ezekiel had no expression whatsoever. If I hadn’t felt him in my mind, I would have thought he was a doll. A black, skin-tight suit covered his skeletal body, except for his giant head. The head swiveled lazily, took in the dim room with eyes larger than my fist. They had no pupils, no whites, no irises. Just darkness. Like the black of space. He had two specks for nostrils, but no nose. A slit for a mouth, but no lips. Nothing that looked like ears. His skin, grayish white, seemed to glow. If you looked at him straight on, you began to think you could

see through him, like he was mist. His booted feet dangled from the chair, not even touching the ground. He couldn't have been four feet tall.

Lorelei startled me by laughing. I'd forgotten she was there. Ezekiel reached out to her with a four-fingered hand. She took it and held it with both of her hands and laughed again. Her eyes fluttered. I thought I could see tears.

"Maurus," she whispered, sounding almost intoxicated. "Come say hi to Ezekiel."

I hissed and took a step forward. "Hi," I squeaked. The blades of migraine in my head twisted.

Lorelei let go of Ezekiel's hand and looked at me. She wiped her eyes and grinned. "Come on," she giggled. "You can do it." She sat down at Ezekiel's right and left me the chair across from him.

"How do *you* do it?" I asked, inching slowly toward the table. It was like approaching a furnace.

"It gets easier," she said. "Look how far you've come already! You could touch that chair if you put your arm out."

I looked at her. "This is quite amusing to you, isn't it?" I realized my face was a perpetual grimace.

“Yes,” she said, choking down laughter. “Now go on. Just do it. Rip the band-aid off and sit.”

Somehow, I did it. I yanked the chair out and dove into it. For some reason, I made a noise like I’d touched something hot.

Lorelei’s pent up laughter spilled out. She patted my arm. “Well done. Why don’t you introduce yourself? You didn’t really get the chance last time.”

I looked in the general direction of Ezekiel. I didn’t want to look at his eyes. I do that anyway, even with normal people, but with him it was a million times worse.

I pulled my lips into a smile. “Um. Hello—“

“Ahp!” Lorelei interrupted. “Hold out your hand.” I looked at her, tried to gauge her level of seriousness. She giggled, but nodded for me to proceed.

I held my hand out, palm downward. Ezekiel cupped it between his two hands. I flinched, worried the touch would supercharge his telepathic signal, but it didn’t. His skin was almost scaly—not quite like snakeskin, but in the ballpark. My skin tingled against it. The hairs on my hand stood up, as if Ezekiel carried a charge.

“Is this a conventional greeting among his people?” I asked Lorelei.

She shrugged. “Not that I know of. It’s just conventional among us. Why don’t you ask him? Introduce yourself!”

I turned back to Ezekiel. “I’m sorry,” I said to him. I realized I was making the unkind and classically human mistake of thinking of him not as a person, but as an “alien.” I sat up straight and faced him, looking at the center of his very large forehead. “Hello Ezekiel. I’m pleased to meet you. You can call me Maurus.”

A voice rang in my head, clearer and realer than Lorelei’s voice. It was beamed directly to my consciousness, and therefore didn’t have to travel through the air the way sound waves do. This made it sound like it came from nowhere in particular, but also everywhere. It was a fey, lilting voice, kind of high-pitched, like some magical fairy creature. It sounded neither male nor female.

<Maurus,> the voice said. But it said so much more than that, somehow. Ezekiel’s feelings flowed through the word. Every impression he had about me, the idea of meeting me, and even about greetings in general, were all contained in the word. I knew that he knew Maurus wasn’t my real name, and that he knew what my real name was, just as he

knew everything about me, and that he found the idea of names amusing, and that he liked the name "Ezekiel," and that he admired Lorelei's cheekiness in giving it to him, and that he admired Lorelei as a whole. All this information came through two syllables. One soundless word was a vessel for the entirety of Ezekiel, as he manifested in that particular moment.

"He speaks…English?" I breathed. It was a ridiculous question. I didn't know why I asked it. It was a knee-jerk response from a brain stuck in Earth-mode. What did the word "English" even mean, in the context of telepathy?

"Ezekiel doesn't *speak,*" Lorelei said. "The working theory is that our brains translate the 'gist' of his thought-messages into our native languages. For convenience, right? The human brain isn't equipped to deal with a stream of psychic information from another being. But it is equipped for language."

"So do you hear the same 'words' from him as I do?"

I saw Lorelei's pearly teeth peek out in the candlelight gloom. "I hear my *version* of them. Think of this like a conference call. Ezekiel can broadcast to whomever he chooses. He can mute one caller and put another on blast, if

he wants. But all of us are interpreting his signals through our own unique lenses."

I nodded. "Interesting," was my inadequate reply.

Mr. Gray's voice almost knocked me out of my chair. It sounded like he came through a PA system. "Be mindful of our objectives, please." I turned and saw that he was standing behind the glass partition again, with the doctors from last time. I must have been so shaken when we came in that I hadn't noticed them. "Make your introductions," he said, "but do not linger. We do not have the time we would like to have."

<Mr. Gray seeks salvation through our technology,> Ezekiel said, his voice rising and falling, like the gentle sound of waves on a beach. <But he uses the wrong compass. Humanity is not an engineering problem.>

That almost sounded like a diss. I went white and looked at Mr. Gray, but as usual, he didn't move. Or blink. Or breathe. Did he really have nothing to say to that?

I turned to Lorelei for guidance. She stiffened a bit. "All private communications from the EBEs are to be reported to Mr. Gray immediately after the interviews in which they occur."

Private communications?

I had to stop myself from laughing. He hadn't heard it. Mr. Gray was supposed to be running this meeting, but Ezekiel was cutting him out of it. It sounded like this happened all the time.

"Um." I cleared my throat. "Okay. So what is humanity's problem? Is that why you're here? To solve our problems?"

Mr. Gray blared over the PA again, his tone firm, but still inhumanly poised. "That is not a topic we will be discussing in this interview series. You are an engineer, Mr. Maurus. I expect you to keep your questions within the bounds of your career field."

Ezekiel ignored Mr. Gray. <Your problem,> he said, <is that you try to invent the truth rather than yield to it.>

I tried not to gasp. Again, he "said" far more than his words did. I had a vision of a bulldozer carving up a once-green hill, spewing innards of mud and soil. It lumbered on, yellow paint cracked and peeling, labels smudged, stained half-black with years of caked-on debris. Trees were its next victims. Trunks crashed down in sprays of leaves and dust that settled over the soil like the ash of armageddon. A colorful forest, buzzing with the chatter of life, became a gray smudge, and the clinking and

roaring of man's "construction" vehicle were the only sounds that remained.

The emotional message of the scene wasn't about environmentalism or the plundering of Earth's resources, though these issues did have *incidental* significance. It wasn't even so much that there was anything wrong with bulldozing per se. What I got from it was that we, humanity, were bulldozers gone amok. The world was a living paradise. Nature, being an active process rather than a "thing," was perfect. All we had to do was live *with* it—to *listen* to its signals—and everything would work itself out better than we could ever imagine. Instead of cooperating with the universe, the human attitude was to plow it over. We thought we could do better than "the truth"—better than what *was*—and in our arrogance we were turning evergreen Heaven into a soupy brown mush. The truth was alive. It evolved. We could change the world, but only by realizing change was a constant flow that we were a part of anyway. In trying to force the universe to be something it wasn't, we were destroying it, as well as ourselves.

<Do not reveal your emotions,> Ezekiel warned. His giant head swayed dreamily, without any emotion of its own. The movement drew the reflection of one of the soft orange

light fixtures in the ceiling over the black of his eye, like a dim star. I blinked away a mist of tears. <Ask me how the saucers tap into the vacuum for power.>

I glanced at Lorelei. She gave me a small smile of encouragement. Her hands were folded over the table, fingers squeezing and unsqueezing her knuckles in an anxious rhythm. “So,” I said obediently. “You channel the zero-point energy in fixed amounts, as needed? How is that possible?”

<Very good,> Ezekiel said. The aimless drift of his head shifted back the way it began. Those eyes of his were like black holes. I actually grabbed the edges of the table, afraid they would suck me out of body. <Maurus,> he said, like a schoolteacher brandishing a ruler. <What truth are you avoiding?>

I braced myself for another cosmic vision, but none came. “I…” I made some throaty clicking noise, like an insect, which made me sound about as dumb and confused as I would have been if we were actually talking about zero-point energy and the engines of flying saucers.

<The question is simple,> he said. His eyes centered on me a little more.

“I don’t…”

<What is the reality you don't wish to see? And what are the lies you invent to abuse it with?>

There was no flood of telepathic feelings. I wasn't flung into any ritualistic dream. None of the sanity-bending things I had come to expect from Ezekiel were happening. He was just asking me pointed questions, which was almost worse. *I* had to answer them, alone, with no psychedelic hints.

The first thing I thought of was my mom, which made no sense. I imagined her in her chair at home, smoking a cigarette, dusk bleeding through the edges of gray window shades, her gray pajamas, gray eyes, everything about her generally gray, except her hair, which splayed black and fine all the way down to her waist. I saw her as she was years ago, when I was a kid, with her look of perpetual indifference, puffing on that weekly cigarette, that one small indulgence, that one ritual dip into vice every Friday night. I remember nurturing, as kids do, an odd sentimentality for "Mommy's Smoking Time," even though there was no reason to be excited by her blank stare, or the smell of cancer rising, or the slow yellowing of that particular corner of the ceiling above her chair.

<There it is,> Ezekiel said.

“Wait, what?” I sputtered and looked around the dark room with an impulse of defiance. “There what is? What does that mean?”

<My question. Your memory is the answer.>

For some reason I fixated on Ezekiel’s suit for a few seconds, which seemed to be made of the same material as that of dress socks, though I was sure it was more exotic than that. I chose my words carefully, feeling Mr. Gray’s eyes through the glass.

“I do not understand. Please elaborate.”

<Your mother. You have buried her. She’s locked in the basement of your soul.>

I knew exactly what he meant, because I couldn’t help knowing what he meant, thanks to telepathy. But my instinct was to be confused. I wanted *not* to understand. My mother, in general, was the truth I was avoiding. The bare fact of her, and the way she still lived inside me, still influenced my behavior, even after ten years of no contact whatsoever.

Fine. I could get with that. I’m hip to psychology. So I have mommy issues. Who doesn’t? Sue me.

That wasn’t it, though. There was far more to the problem, according to Ezekiel’s transcendent emotions. He was telling me that

my unresolved issues with my mother had *cosmic* significance. They were the bulldozer. *My* personal mommy issues were the bulldozer of collective humanity, and if I could overcome them, the entire human race would also be cured. The forests would be saved. The plows would stop plowing.

I know. It's fucking absurd. Take it up with Ezekiel.

"This is fucking absurd," I said aloud.

"Maurus," Lorelei cautioned. She put her hand on mine, and to my shock, I flung it away.

"No, it's preposterous! Do you hear what he's saying? This is a waste of all our time."

<Maurus,> Ezekiel echoed. <Please listen. I have another question.>

I threw my hands up. "God help us."

<What happens when you ignore a dragon?>

I laughed helplessly. "How would one even do that? Wouldn't that be kind of a tough thing to ignore?"

<Certainly. But ignoring dragons is what all you people are doing. So they grow and grow and spread their fire all over the universe.>

I crossed my arms. "What an original metaphor."

<You're doing it right now,> Ezekiel said. <You know exactly what my "metaphor" refers

to and are deliberately ignoring it. Because you're afraid.>

"So if I just face my fears and slay the dragon in my heart, the whole universe will be saved? You flew ten thousand light years to tell me that?"

Mr. Gray's voice slithered overhead. "That is enough for one day. Let us collect ourselves and—"

<Just a moment, Mr. Gray,> Ezekiel said. Lorelei twitched, as if startled by the sternness Ezekiel had just projected into all of our brains. I pouted and listened.

<Maurus,> he said again, <what sort of dragon do you suppose your mother could evolve into, if she were locked away and ignored for too long?>

"Dragons are a metaphor," I sassed. "My mom is not a metaphor. She isn't a dragon."

<Not she herself, but the version of her that lives in you. If not a dragon, what sort of terrifying force do you suppose she may have become?>

"Enough," came Mr. Gray again, his voice forceful, but still somehow emotionless. "This conversation has veered far enough. It is time we all—"

<Not *yet,* Mr. Gray,> Ezekiel thundered. The room shook. Lorelei gasped and covered her mouth.

"No," I whimpered. The image of Ravana floated over my soul, the light of her womb blazing, coaxing, enticing. This vision also came from my own mind, and not from Ezekiel, yet it was so clear that I almost believed Ravana was in the room with us. "You motherfucker," I said.

<You misdirect your anger,> Ezekiel said calmly. <In fact, it isn't anger at all. It is fear. You'd rather be angry with me than know the truth.>

"You don't know the truth," I spat. "You don't know everything. You aren't a god."

<What I know is irrelevant,> he said. His mystic eyes finally locked onto mine. My soul went over their event horizon. His next message was everything, dumped over my essence like a waterfall, so that it was the "truest" thing I had ever heard. <The issue is what you know, yet pretend not to know. *Ravana is your real mother.*>

I bolted up and threw my chair out behind me. "YOU CAN'T FUCKING DO THIS TO ME!!"

It was like a nuclear shockwave hit the room. The table launched up and hit the ceiling with a deafening metallic clang. The empty chair

to my right flew and cracked the glass partition. I was thrown back over my chair and into the wall. Lorelei wasn't physically affected, but screamed and lunged into the corner. The table remained on the ceiling for a few seconds, like it was magnetized, then crashed down in front of a motionless Ezekiel. Mr. Gray also said and did nothing. He looked on through the damaged glass and watched me cough and groan and rub my bruised back.

As soon as this "psychic pulse"—or whatever it was—hit, Ezekiel totally vanished from my mind. Being suddenly alone in my brain again was almost as jarring as being slammed into the wall. I started to gather myself and saw that he was twitching, seizing. His slit of a mouth formed an "O" and his head bobbed and jutted, like a cat choking on a hairball. After a moment of dumb shock, the med techs spilled into the room, cradling Ezekiel's massive head and pulling him out of his seat.

Lorelei was crying. The med techs carried Ezekiel into his little apartment. Lorelei didn't follow. That seemed to cost her something. Her whole body trembled.

Mr. Gray walked silently out of his viewing room, slow and serene, hands folded behind his back. That was the last thing I saw before another "vision" overtook me, implanted

in my brain, apparently, by Ezekiel's attack. But this wasn't like the others. It was a *real* event—real even in this universe, this lifetime. I experienced it like a memory, though it wasn't my own, and hadn't yet occurred. In another timeless trance, I was made to remember what was soon to come…

…Mr. Gray walked into Ezekiel's chambers, alone. The room was small and even less inviting than the conference room. The walls were concrete and windowless. It was a prison cell, lit by a single bare bulb that flickered overhead. Ezekiel had recovered from his seizure and sat expectantly on a thin cot. What a meeting of eyes this was. Mr. Gray's callous black pools met the infamy of Ezekiel's without fear. They studied each other in silence for several minutes, each as outwardly passionless as the other. I witnessed the scene in third person, a disembodied onlooker.

Mr. Gray broke the silence. "You are becoming uncooperative."

<I am perfectly within the bounds of our arrangement.> This was the most human comment I'd heard from Ezekiel. It was a lawyer thing to say.

"We have met our obligations for that arrangement," Mr. Gray replied. "And here you

are playing games. Your predecessor also played games."

Ezekiel's great head tilted in that slow, dreamy way it had. <You think you can sway me with poorly veiled threats?>

Mr. Gray crossed his arms. "I know your kind can hurt."

<Learned that from my predecessor, did you?>

"We have learned much about the anatomy of your species…per our arrangement."

<Have you?>

Mr. Gray said nothing. His face remained blank. He might have been ponderous.

<What is it to suffer, Mr. Gray? How do you define it?>

"You excel at changing the subject. Despite all your preaching about neglected truths."

<Yet it is you who avoids my question. Look how human you've become. Such a meager amount of power has clouded your senses. You forget who you are. What you are.>

"Meager?" Mr. Gray raised an eyebrow. "Who is sitting in whose dungeon?"

Ezekiel's head completed its rightward drift and began tilting to the left, lazy like a cloud. <Who indeed? You think this is your

dungeon? You think I am here on sufferance? Do you really believe you could hurt us if we did not allow ourselves to be hurt?>

Mr. Gray took a step closer to Ezekiel. "You might feel differently if you had heard your predecessor's screams."

<How do you know I didn't?>

"Enough. I did not come for riddles and questions."

<Why did you come?>

"Because you have agitated me."

<Why?>

Mr. Gray chuckled—a minuscule hint of human emotion. "It seems we must have a frank discussion about your role in this arrangement, this pact between my kind and yours."

<I could not agree more. But you haven't answered my question.>

"You know what agitates me. It is in your head as much as mine."

<I do know. But you don't.>

Mr. Gray smiled. I had never seen him smile. His teeth were impeccable, the canines filed to points, like a vampire. He stepped up to Ezekiel and put one palm on his substantial forehead. He danced the finger of his other hand in front of Ezekiel's eye. "These legendary eyes of yours," he hummed. "How might you feel if I were to cut one of them out?"

A flash of white light snapped around Ezekiel. Mr. Gray staggered back. Where Ezekiel had been sat a regal figure—tall, clean-shaven, cloaked in white, black hair braided, fingertips joined beneath the chin. A pair of white, feathered wings unfurled behind his back, the tips stretching all the way from one side of the cell to the other. The angel was olive-skinned. I couldn't pinpoint an ethnicity—there were elements of Asia, Arabia, and even pre-colonial America. He gazed at Mr. Gray like a grandparent would, seeing all of his bullshit, but judging none of it. A soft, golden glow enveloped him. It never faded.

"You are agitated because you are afraid, Mr. Gray," Ezekiel said in a voice too beautiful to be human, but nonetheless a voice, the product of physical vocal cords and sound waves. It retained the androgynous pitch and sing-song demeanor of his telepathic "voice."

"I…" Mr. Gray cleared his throat. Otherwise, his voice was steady. "I have nothing to fear from you."

"Not me," said the angel Ezekiel. "What I represent."

"Oh?" Mr. Gray adjusted his black tie, wiped a shoulder of his black suit. "And what do you represent? Trickery and illusion? The fantasy of a stage magician?"

Ezekiel gave a smile that compelled worship, but would never demand it. "The terrifying vastness of existence," he said, spreading his arms. The glow around his body flared so that his white cloak shone like starlight.

"So it's that old, tired lecture then?" Mr. Gray folded his hands behind his back. "The pseudo-moralistic rhetoric about power being a compensation for fear, for a wounded human ego?"

"I'm not interested in morals." Ezekiel brought his hands together again. "I have nothing to lecture. I ask only that you see what is already there."

"And why should I believe that you can see what I cannot?"

"Belief is irrelevant. The beauty of being human is that you can see everything, if only you are willing to look. And you are quite human indeed, Mr. Gray."

"Stop saying that."

Ezekiel grinned. "The thought of being human offends you?"

Mr. Gray stepped forward and belted Ezekiel in the cheek with the back of his hand. Ezekiel took the hit, let it redirect his gaze, but there was no indication of pain, or even surprise.

"I am not fooled by this charade of superiority," Mr. Gray hissed. "It was we who

shot your ship down. It was we *who captured* you.*"*

Ezekiel turned his eyes slowly back to Mr. Gray, speaking as he did. "Do you not occasionally drop a key into a monkey's cage, just to see what he will do with it?"

"You are sick," Mr. Gray said. "Only we can make you better. That is the 'key' that we hold. A slow and agonizing death awaits you, and only I can stop it, by my word alone."

Ezekiel folded his wings. "What makes you think death means anything to me?"

They stared at each other for another minute. Mr. Gray left the room and said nothing.

Almost. I almost felt bad for him once. A few weeks before I roasted him. Grandpa came by. Grandpa never came by. I was like five last time I saw him. He brought in a cloud of whiskey stink. You could smell it all the way upstairs.
He was asking for money. Like we had any. It was Mom who finally ran him out of the house. My dad couldn't say a word to him. It was a weird transference. My dad looked at his dad the way I looked at my dad.
But one little nugget of almost-sympathy isn't enough. Not by a damn sight. I have more balls than my dad did. If I could go back, I'd still burn him. Again and again.

-From Session 6 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 06

It wasn't a scandalous-looking house. Nothing remarkable about it. I guess being unremarkable was the goal of the whole neighborhood. Grey siding and manicured lawns were everywhere. Couldn't tell any of the houses apart. Everyone lived in an identical rectangle.

I followed Carnell into this town of crushed souls and wrote down the house number he pulled up at. Gray curtains covered all the windows. Couldn't see inside. I called my tech nerds and had them tap into the mic on Carnell's phone.

People living in such clean places are always watching for something dirty. I figured I better not park in the road and stare at Alice's house. Decided to go for a drive into Utah's countryside and stream Carnell's meeting through my car radio. Maybe I'd see some bison or antelope or something.

Carnell's beefy fist sounded like a clod of mud hitting the door. It creaked open. After a pause, a woman said: "Why the look? Come in or don't. Stop grinning like that."

Her voice gave me goosebumps. It was low and kind of raspy, but so stern and confident. Powerful.

She clucked her tongue and slammed the door behind Carnell. “God damn it. I told you to wipe it. You look like a dog with that smile. Shall I throw you a scrap of meat?”

“I’m just happy to see you,” he said.

“*What?* What did you say? Never mind. Do you have something for me?”

There was a silver minivan ahead of me filled with dancing kids. I could see hands waving through the rear windshield, parents’ heads bobbing along. They stopped where the sign told them to and signaled right to leave the development. I turned my blinker on.

“Sort’a,” Carnell said. “I have some things I want to say.”

Alice huffed. “Talk was not part of our deal.”

“It’s important, Alice. You need to hear it.”

I got a glimpse of the children’s faces as the van made its turn. I counted four, but there could have been five. Guess they don’t like birth control in Utah.

A black sedan had been waiting to the left. It began to move. I pulled out ahead of it

and followed the van. The sedan braked hard and blared its horn.

"Since when did you start using my name?" Alice said. "What is going on with you?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about. Can I sit? I'm gonna sit."

The phone in his pocket brushed against the cushions of the couch and made an ear-piercing scratching noise. I turned the volume down on the radio until he settled.

"Oh, splendid." Alice smacked her thighs. "I appreciate you waiting for permission."

"No problem," Carnell said. "Now listen, I want to—"

Alice laughed. "I've 'listened' to more than enough of you these past months, and you're lucky I did that. Playing therapist for you was never part of our arrangement."

"I appreciate it, Doctor," he said. "But I'm all better now. What I want to talk about is you."

The happy family ahead of me kept up with their show tunes. Their mindless cheer had drowned out the angry honking of the guy behind us. He drove his sedan all the way up my ass.

"Me?" Alice said with amazement. "My goodness, Miles, have you finally come out of your ass for a breath of fresh air?"

"Yup," Carnell said casually. "You're in danger. I know a way to save you, but you won't like it."

Alice laughed again. "Oh dear. I take it back. You've simply gone from narcissist to messiah. You have upgraded your ego. Now you're my savior."

"It's actually pretty serious," Carnell said.

"Do you have data for me or not?"

"I'm getting to that."

"A simple yes or no will suffice."

"Can I just say what I have to say first? Please, it's important. For *you.*"

"Fine. You have one minute. Get on with it."

The sedan rode me even harder. Guy was making a real point of it. Our convoy was heading through a little country town now. Buildings and civilization were thinning out. I opened my glove compartment and pulled out my pistol. Pointed it at the rear windshield and started counting. I got to two before sedan guy backed off. Ahead, the children danced.

"They're gonna kill me," Carnell said. "And if they're after me, they've probably found out about you. Ergo, you're in danger."

"Do you have my data?"

"Christ woman, my minute isn't up yet."

It sounded like Alice sipped from a drink. “I am terminating your minute,” she said.

“Why?”

There was a clattering sound, like bracelets hitting a countertop. “Because your conversation doesn’t interest me.”

“Alice, I just told you they will *kill you.*”

“But you won’t tell me if you have my data. Which leads me to believe that you don’t. Thus, you are useless.”

Carnell laughed. “Okay, this is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. This cold ice queen thing cannot be real. You have to have emotions in there somewhere. Is this really how you want to be? Do you want to *go out* like this?”

A subtler sound, like bracelets clinking, like she was shaking her arms. “I’m sorry. But a lecture from you about emotional maturity is an incomputable sum of irony. I simply cannot process it. I am flabbergasted. Try saying something else.”

An old church passed by to my right. Sedan guy pulled into the parking lot. He and Sky Daddy faded into the rearview. Me and the big happy family were alone on the road.

“Just ask yourself,” Carnell went on. “Just look into it: why are you so bitter?”

"Oh!" Her words broke up with scornful giggles. "Bitter? You think me *bitter,* do you?"

"I know you are."

She sobered up. "You don't know shit but the smell of your own ass."

"Look, I know, I'm an arrogant fuck, whatever. Just put that aside for a minute and think about this. Okay? You need to figure this out. You need to heal your soul before they come for you. I'm telling you. You don't want to die before you let go of this, this, *resentment,* this—"

At the sound of the word "soul" she had started wheezing. "A sermon!" She rasped. "A *sermon*, now! Oh my. What *happened* to you? Your delusions have taken on cosmic proportions. Well, perhaps you are good for something after all, Miles. A laugh, if nothing else. Oh my. Oh my goodness."

"You can't laugh away the truth," Carnell said.

"Do you have my data or not?" She asked, clearing her throat. "I will not ask again."

"The data is meaningless. Will you please just think about what I said?"

"Yes or no, you cockroach. Do you have my data? Yes or no."

"No."

"Then get out of my house."

There was a thud. Like Carnell had dropped his hands helplessly in his lap. “All right,” he said. “I said what I had to say. I tried.” His microphone shuffled.

“Yes, goodbye now,” Alice said. “Go clean out your soul, spirit man. Go rub out some sanctity.”

Her voice got more distant. The front door creaked open again and she yelled in the background. “No one cares about you. Insect! I never did. You’re a cockroach! I try to flush you away and you crawl back up the toilet bowl! Go to the sewer and be a saint, spirit roach! Go cleanse your soul with…”

Her voice trailed off. There was nothing left to hear, so I turned off the stream.

The Merry Mom Mobile led me into desolate country. World was a bowl of dry and craggy rocks. Mountains in the distance reached out to us like the arms of someone neglected. The kids still clapped and bounced, the parents still danced and goaded them into further stupidity. Made me sick. Where the fuck were they going, and why were they so happy to be on their way? It was probably the same camping trip they took every weekend. They’d make marshmallows and s’mores and chant their cutesy songs “until the cows came home” and they’d love every second of it.

I stomped on the gas and rammed their bumper. Mom's frantic hands spazzed and all the happy heads snapped back. Dad in the driver's seat hit the brakes as his family craned their necks to see what was going on. I kept pushing. Our tires sang their own screeching songs. Smoke billowed and obscured my view of the crotch goblins. Stink of burned rubber had my eyes watering.

We were quickly losing speed, so I yanked the wheel hard left and spun the van off the road. It sailed into the ditch and landed with a short, sharp crunch. The tail end bobbled in the air and the engine hissed and whined. Rear wheels sniffed at a sky they'd never seen before.

Dad punched his airbag and smushed his face in the window and tried to eyeball me. I peeled away and saw the faces of crying children and a loving mother reaching out to hold them.

They weren't hurt, but they would damn well remember.

Genius is lonely. Not because having it makes you "better" than anyone else, but because it makes you unlike *anyone else. Even other geniuses are "gifted" in ways you aren't, and vice versa, so it's hard to find common ground. But being so alone with your talents allows you creative joys that most people never get to experience. I have a well of gold in the backyard of my mind, and the more I plumb it, the fuller it gets. Most life pleasures are the opposite. It's a paradox though, because being human, I crave companionship. I don't want to be alone, but I'm terrified to lose the gift of aloneness.*

-From Session 8 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 08

I woke up in one of the lounge chairs outside of Ezekiel's quarters. Mr. Gray loomed over me with his arms crossed. In the dim orange light, he was a silhouette of the Devil.

"Welcome back, Mr. Maurus." His tone was perfectly polite, even casual.

I rubbed at my wrists. I expected to find them handcuffed, but they weren't. "How long have I been out?"

Mr. Gray didn't move. He didn't even fidget. "Just a few minutes."

I looked around, at that silent pit of a place. There wasn't even white noise, like water dripping, or the hum of air vents. Mr. Gray and I were alone in Hell.

"Where's Lorelei?"

He kept glaring at me. "Returned to her domicile. She is fairly upset."

"What about Ezekiel?"

Mr. Gray took a long breath through his nose. "EBE-10," he corrected, giving Ezekiel's official designation, "is unwell. Our doctors are tending to him. And how are you feeling?"

I confirmed then that the "scene" I witnessed between Mr. Gray and Ezekiel hadn't

happened yet. Mr. Gray's supernatural calm was unbroken. At that moment, he still believed that Ezekiel was just a sick alien, at least somewhat under his control. So when would it happen? It couldn't have been long. Probably within the hour. Would I survive until then? I may not have been tied down, and I didn't see any guards, but sitting there under Mr. Gray's "agitated" eyes felt a lot like interrogation.

"Hungry," I replied. "But altogether well enough."

"What about emotionally?" Mr. Gray continued to stand there, arms still crossed, moving not even his eyelids.

"Well," I sighed. "I suppose you gathered that I wasn't happy with what Ezekiel had to say."

I marveled at my own smoothness. I was in the Devil's dungeon, and he was pissed off. A week ago I would have been too nervous to speak. Now, all the right words poured out of my mouth, without effort.

"Quite," Mr. Gray said. "Just what *did* he say to you, Mr. Maurus?"

I chuckled. "Funnily enough, he was very interested in my mother. Like you were. I remember being asked a number of questions about her during my psych screenings, when I first got here."

Mr. Gray gave one of his almost-smiles. “And yet you were never so…*rattled,* during our screenings. So he must have said a good deal more than that.”

“Yes.” I leaned forward and folded my hands between my knees. “He implied that, uh…saucer six, the one I’ve been working on, you know…it’s strange, but Ezekiel seems to think it represents my mother, in some sense. For me. Like it’s some kind of archetype. As if I’ve made it a personal symbol of whatever repressed mommy issues I have in my subconscious.”

Mr. Gray nodded, still wearing the ghost of a smile. “He has a lot of funny ideas like that.”

“Indeed,” I said, trying to sound thoughtful. I looked up at him. “Believe it or not, Mr. Gray, I think it works to our benefit. It gives me a few ideas about how we might crack this saucer.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

I scratched my beard. “Well. It has been my observation that we seem to make progress on saucer six during moments of acute emotionality. Every time we’ve had a ‘breakthrough’ with this case, it has happened when I’ve become most, as you say, ‘rattled’ by it. Ezekiel fed me a few lines about zero-point

energy and vacuum power, but they felt like footnotes to me. Like a plumber explaining, technically, why you shouldn't flush baby wipes. You don't really need to know the why of it. It's just clarification."

Mr. Gray rubbed thoughtfully at his own beard, which was trimmed far more neatly than mine. "And you believe that by tapping into your 'mommy issues,' as you call them, you can get saucer six running for you? Consistently, that is, and at your will?"

I spread my hands. "Something like that, yes."

Mr. Gray gave a satisfied nod and finally uncrossed his arms. "Then you'll get started as soon as you're able." He started walking away, back down the hall to Ezekiel's room. "Tomorrow at the latest," he called back over his shoulder. "Later tonight would be better."

I stood from my chair. "What about Ezekiel? I may still need his help."

Mr. Gray stopped and turned back to me, hands folded behind his back in his trademark way. "I don't think you'll be seeing him again, Mr. Maurus. Thank you for your cooperation. Please leave now and do as I have asked."

He turned and left. A strong conviction came over me that the scene I witnessed between he and Ezekiel was about to occur.

Knowing this was the only thing that kept me from total panic. Mr. Gray's tone was chilling. It didn't bode well.

Ezekiel had told me something I didn't want to hear, and I briefly hated him for it. But in the end, he's actually my savior. Whatever curse Ravana has put on me, Ezekiel knows how to lift it. I can't let anything happen to him. But his fate is entwined, somehow, with my relationship with Ravana.

I need to save him to save me, but in order to save him, I must stare down my blackest abyss.

Lorelei answered her door quickly, like she'd been waiting for someone. Her eyes were puffy and swollen, the blues brighter than usual. She wore a baggy black T-shirt with a band name etched in such thorny, ornate font that I couldn't read it, a pair of pink basketball shorts, no socks—pajamas, I gathered.

She made herself smile. "Hey, come in!" I followed her enthusiastic wave into the domicile. "I'm so glad you're all right," she said, shutting the door. "I wasn't sure what would happen, or what *did* happen, or…" she stepped around to face me and grasped my shoulders. "*Are* you all right? Do you need to sit down?

Come on, sit down. Have you had anything to drink yet?"

She nudged me over to her couch and hustled into the kitchen. I sat down in a daze of emotion. I don't know why. I had kept such a cool head for Mr. Gray, of all people, but now the offer of a simple glass of water had me swallowing tears.

She returned to the living room and handed me my glass. I realized I hadn't said a word yet. "Thank you," I offered blandly.

Lorelei moved stiffly across the living room, over a rug of swirling pink and orange. She stopped at the end table on the other side of the couch and grabbed the picture I'd been looking at last time I was here—the one with her sister. She wrapped her free arm around her waist and swayed a bit. What had happened between she and her sister? I wanted to ask, but it was obviously a delicate subject, and I can never tell when it's okay to broach delicate subjects and when it isn't. Maybe that's why I'm still a virgin.

I wrestled with this decision for a full minute—to ask or not to ask. The silence in the room was a dense cloud. In the end, I decided on an indirect approach.

"What are you looking at?" I ventured.

Lorelei's head snapped up, as if she'd forgotten I was there. She put the picture back on the end table, face down. "Nothing." She scratched around her ears with both hands so that her raven hair billowed around her fingers. "Maurus," she said. "Can you please tell me you're all right? I need to know you're all right."

"Yes, yes." I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, yes. I don't mean to be so quiet. I'm just, uh… trying to…"

She turned and narrowed her eyes. "Will you drink some of that, please?"

I gulped down some water. "Yes, thank you, by the way." I took another good swig and set the glass down on the coffee table. "Look. Obviously things have escalated a bit here—"

"HAH!"

"—and it seems we're both a little hazy about it."

She kept pacing a short line in front of me, back and forth. "That's one word for it. Yeah, things have most definitely *escalated.* Jesus. Maurus, I was worried you were *dead.*"

I blinked. "I don't think Ezekiel would—"

"I'm not talking about him. I don't want to talk about Ezekiel."

"You mean, you thought Mr.—"

"*Ssshhh!*" She flung her arms in a circle, indicating the room in general, as if the walls

themselves were listening. Knowing Black Book, they probably were.

"Right," I nodded. "Well, if it's any consolation, I don't think we'll need to worry about that."

She stopped pacing and fixed her glistening eyes on me. "Are you saying that because you're trying to be optimistic, or because you know something?"

"Because I know. Look. The, uh…*general goal,* here…" I moved my arms in a broad circle, hinting as she had. "Is to reverse-engineer the saucers, as you know. Or, more broadly, to exploit the advanced technology these 'Visitors' possess. As long as we're making headway in that department, we're safe. And I am making headway."

"Yeah. I know all that," she said flatly. "What I don't know is anything about this 'headway' you describe. I don't mean to sound insulting, but from where I was sitting it didn't look like anything resembling 'headway' was made in that meeting."

I took another sip of water. "I know it looked that way. But I assure you, the shitshow in there *was* the headway."

She flipped her hand in the air. "How? How exactly does that work?"

I grimaced. Suddenly, I was nauseous. “It’s, uhh. Look, it’s hard to explain, but there’s something I have to do. Something I have to *face.* I don’t want to do it. That’s why I got so upset in there. Anyway, it all comes back to Ravana.”

She put the first two fingers of each hand on her temples and rubbed. “Who or what is a Ravana?”

“Ravana is the saucer I’ve been working on. Saucer six. It’s the reason I got to meet Ezekiel in the first place. He made me understand what I have to do.”

Her hands dropped to her sides. “Well, that makes one of us.”

I had a sudden urge to lie down on her couch and enter a coma, but I thought that would be too familiar. So I just sat back a bit. “I said it was hard to explain. I don’t know how to articulate it. But the point is, we have time. A little bit of it, anyway. While I work on Ravana, we have time to plan our next move.”

“Next move?” She came over and fell onto the couch next to me. She leaned to the other side and massaged her forehead.

“Yes. There’s another aspect of this thing we need to discuss. More escalations.”

“Oh god.”

"I know, but listen. I saw something again. In the end, when I passed out. You mentioned Ezekiel has made you see things?"

"Yes…"

"Well, he showed me something. Something that was going to happen. I think it's happening now. Like, this second."

She sat with her eyes closed, one hand on her head. Her jaw was clenched.

"I think it was a warning," I went on. "A plea for help, sort of. He was showing me his situation, how it's unraveling. There may not be much time for him, and Mr. Gray isn't going to let us see him again."

"Good," she snapped.

My eyes almost popped out of my skull. "*What?*"

"I said *good.* I don't want to see him again."

I stammered for a moment. "Are you making a joke? How can you say that?"

She glanced at me, disgusted, then launched herself off the couch. "*How?*" She resumed pacing her route in front of me. "*Joke?* Let me tell you a joke. Yes, Ezekiel has made me 'see things.' You want to know all I've *seen* thanks to Ezekiel? Let's start with today. Today I *saw* that he is completely full of shit. He's a fucking *liar!*"

I was so dumbfounded by her sudden venom that my words came out weak and hollow. The second they did I wished I hadn't said them. "But we have to help him."

"Help him!" Her voice broke. She turned her back on me and reached toward the end table again, toward the picture. But she thought better of it and stopped. She just stood there, shoulders trembling.

"Lorelei—"

"Maurus," she flared. "I don't want to hear another word about Ezekiel. All right?" She began to cry. "Please, just leave. Can you leave, please? I was worried about you, and I'm glad to see you, but please leave. I'm glad you're okay, but please just go, just go…"

She went into full sobs then, face in her hands. I didn't know what to do. I should have said something, probably. Asked her more about what was bothering her. Isn't that what people do?

But wouldn't that make it worse? Was I really supposed to poke a wound?

I didn't know. I *knew* that I should say something. I felt it very strongly. But I never know what to say. So I left, as she asked, without a word.

My brother tied me to a pole in the basement one night. I was like, seven or eight. That basement scared the shit out of me and he knew it.

He said he'd untie me once I started crying. "That's all ya gotta do!" He kept saying. "Cry for me, and I let ya go!"

I stayed down there all night. Never made a sound. At some point I started hyperventilating and passed out. Dad found me in the morning and laughed.

-From Session 7 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 07

She caught me at about three in the morning. I was waiting outside Carnell's bedroom, hoping he'd sleep. I needed my trophy. Hadn't found anything in the basement that looked sentimental. Dude was staying in his childhood bedroom, so I figured that was the place to find something. But I could tell by the soft glow in the room that he was on his phone. Scrolling. His snoring wasn't shaking the house either.

Floorboards creaked. A short, round figure came out of the master bedroom down the hall. I swung into the spare room across from me. Out the corner of my eye, I saw the person jump.

I drew my gun and twisted the silencer on and waited. The house was so quiet I could hear the person's socks padding over the carpet.

There was a tall dresser next to me and I got around to the side of it and crouched. Peeking over top, I saw curly hair poke into the doorway. It looked around. I put my finger on the trigger. The face inched forward. I saw old, squinting eyes. A pudgy fist came up and rubbed them. It was a woman. Bloated and

saggy. But I could tell she probably had beauty in her day.

Too bad. If she took one more step I'd have to shoot that face.

She looked around some more. Considered. Finally, she pulled her head back into the hall and waddled into Carnell's room.

A raspy voice said: "Miles?"

"Hey Mom." I heard the mattress shift. "Everything okay?"

"There's a woman in the house."

"Oh," he said indulgently. "You saw a woman?"

"Yes! In the spare room."

"Oh, okay. What's her name?"

"Well, I don't know. Did you sneak some girl in the house?"

"Mom, I'm forty-two. Remember? I'm just crashing here for a couple days."

"I know that, but there's still a girl in here. I wonder if we should call the police. Is she yours?"

He laughed softly. There was sadness in it. "Okay, you caught me. Sorry, Mom. I snuck another girl in the house."

There was a light swat, like a smack in the shoulder. "You really think you have to sneak girls in? Still? Why not introduce her? Be a

gentleman about it. Maybe one of these girls will stick around if you learn to be a gentleman."

Socks swiped down the carpet again. More this time. The voices came closer, almost into the doorway. "Yeah I know. Maybe in the morning. Okay?"

"This is embarrassing. I'm not dressed, and that poor girl is hiding from me in that room."

"I know. It's okay. Let's get you back to bed, old Mom."

They'd gotten down the hall now. I stuck my head out of the room. Carnell had his arm around his mother's shoulders. A floorboard quacked as they passed through her doorway.

I followed them down the hall as they entered her bedroom. Worked one eyeball around the doorframe and watched them.

"All these girls," the mother went on. "You and your girls, Miles. You're going to have to settle on one of these girls sometime. You're getting too old for this."

"I know," he said patiently. He helped her into bed, tucked her in. There was a larger figure in bed with her. Probably Carnell's dad. He had his back to me. Couldn't see much of him.

"You'll introduce her in the morning? I'll get to meet this one, maybe?"

“Sure,” Carnell said. “Everything will be okay in the morning. I’ve got it all worked out now.”

“Oh yeah? Got a new job already?”

“New place. We’re all going to a new place. It’s all perfect there. We’ll all be together. And everything will be all right.”

His mom gasped playfully. “Did you book us a getaway? You *did* get a new job. You’re taking us away.”

“Yeah,” he said. “A vacation. We’re going on vacation. I’ll tell you about it in the morning.” He bent and kissed her cheek. “Night, Mom.”

I backed away and slid into the spare room again. On the way, I heard the mother call out: “Tell your girlfriend it was nice to meet her!”

Carnell chuckled. His voice rose as he moved down the hall. “I will.”

I got back behind the dresser right as he passed. But he didn’t look in the room. He didn’t even stop. He went straight back to bed, like all of this was routine.

Out of nowhere, there was a lump in my throat. I swallowed it. My lips started trembling. What the fuck? I covered my mouth and tried to stop it. I squeezed the grip of my gun.

I don’t know what it was. This guy was a douche. Arrogant. Corrupt. Loved to take advantage of his position. Who gives a shit how

he was with his mother? What difference did that make? I blinked rapid-fire so my eyes wouldn't leak.

I left the room and went back down to the basement. Fuck it, I kept thinking. I didn't need a trophy for this one. The guy wouldn't sleep, so I'd never get my chance. I'd have to shoot him, and this was supposed to look like an accident.

I got to the furnace and pulled the battery out of my pocket. Put it down carefully, on the floor. Made sure the little antenna on the end of it wasn't touching anything. Found the gas lines and opened them. My fucking lips started shaking again.

Mr. Gray's voice slithered out of my phone.

"Yes, my dear Arae?"

I lifted my head off the steering wheel. "Everything is in place. Do I have approval to proceed?"

Long pause. Carnell's parents' house sat dark and silent out the windshield. I was parked a few driveways down. I didn't want to look at it.

"You are asking for my approval?" He finally said.

"Yes sir."

"You would like me to approve the orders I have already given you?"

“Well, I just wanted to be sure that my assessment didn’t change anything.”

Another pause. “Are you referring to the assessment you provided before I gave you my orders?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you are asking if my orders have now changed?”

“Yes sir.”

“Have you made any new assessments?”

“No sir. The doctor has nothing, nobody. The woman ran him out. Their relationship seems to be over. Neither party seems to have anyone they can talk to about anything they might know.”

“…So nothing new then, Arae?”

I squeezed the steering wheel. “No sir. I have no new information.”

“Then allow me to reiterate: you have approval to proceed. Visit the good doctor and his family first. Then proceed to the woman. Make it all appear quite natural.”

“Okay. Yes sir.”

“This is how loose ends are tied up, my darling.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Very well. Contact me when it is finished.”

I ended the call and dropped my phone in the passenger seat. Great. Now Mr. Gray thought I was an idiot.

I also thought I was an idiot. What the fuck did I call him for? His orders were clear and precise the first time.

I shook myself and pulled the remote out of my glovebox. Started to feel warm. Why was it so hot? It was fifty degrees outside. I was sitting in a car with no heat on.

I pulled the antenna up on the remote. Funny device. Primitive. Little black thing the size of my thumb. Just a single button. Our tech guys must have thought this was a weird request. Even with the biggest R&D budget on Earth, sometimes all you need is a twitch of a signal. One spark, from one antenna to another.

I pushed the button and the house went up. A blue tongue of fire spit it out in all directions. Shards of glass and wood and family history rained all over the neighborhood like smoking asteroids. Car alarms squealed and lights flickered on in all the quiet houses.

I started my engine and pulled away. My eyes stung and watered. Must have been from the sudden brightness.

I drove past the inferno and watched it in the rearview. Somewhere in that blaze was the

trophy I never found. And I was leaving it there to burn.

How old am I in my dreams? That's an interesting question. I think I'm a kid, usually. Not always. But more often than not. Like nine or ten. They're fantastical dreams, and not in a good way.

-From Session 9 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 09

The sight of Ravana made me feel like a murderer. The black abyss of her stared me down and accused me, like an angry mother does. I was *bad.* My existence in general, the essence of me, was *not good.* I was unwelcome in the universe.

I sent all my techs to work on the other saucers. Mr. Gray followed me over to Ravana. He staked himself out in the corner of my eye. He didn't say why or explain himself. He didn't have to. Both of us knew he was there to make sure I made tangible progress with Ravana. Immediately. I was pretty sure Ezekiel's life depended on it, and I increasingly got the sense that mine did too.

Somehow, though, I wasn't worried about that. There's another weird change. Normally, I worry about the weather—in The Underground, where there is no weather. I worry I'll put on the wrong shirt in the morning. I worry the coffee machine will break. I worry I'll see a stinkbug in my lab. But today, I wasn't worried that my boss might be plotting my death.

What I was facing was worse than death.

I got close enough to touch her. Twenty-five feet of shadow eclipsed my vision. Electricity hummed in a general way. I didn't know if it was around her, physically, or if it was in my mind. But it was undeniable. It pulled me like a magnet.

I wanted to resist, but I didn't. Mr. Gray's eyes were lasers in my back. I reached out and put my hand on Ravana's flank. It was warm. It felt more like flesh than metal.

I closed my eyes. I was supposed to think of something upsetting, apparently. That's what Ravana likes.

First, I thought of Lorelei. I didn't like how I left things with her. It seemed that whatever bond we had begun to develop was destroyed. And it was my fault. She had cared deeply for Ezekiel, trusted him, and my outburst ruined their relationship, somehow.

Thinking about this brought a sharp pang to my gut. I don't know who gave that feeling a pretty name like "butterflies in the stomach." Butterflies are gentle and delicate. Their wings are soft brushes. This felt more like porcupine quills.

Instead of trying to bat the quills down, like I normally would, I watched them, let them do their thing. They moved around in my midsection like embryos.

Ravana didn't hate this—I felt a faint surge in whatever magnetic force was drawing us together—but it wasn't enough. She didn't "turn on."

I sighed and lowered my head. I squared my shoulders and put my other hand on Ravana, as if I was about to push her up a hill. It really had to be my mother.

Why? It's the peak of unlikelihood. I write the words and laugh at how crazy they are to read back. An alien flew trillions of miles, through the stars and wonders of the galaxy, on a mission to investigate the mommy issues of a single earthling. What concern could this *possibly* be to them? How could they even know about me at all, let alone my psychological issues?

I clenched my teeth and listened to the sounds of the hangar—drills, voices, the buzz of electronics. Mr. Gray stared at the back of my head. I could feel it. He was probably fantasizing about what it would look like on a stick.

My mother. What was I supposed to think about my mother? What was my big, subconscious blockage?

My eyes were still closed, so I brought up an image of her in my head and let my mind do the rest. I figured the best way to understand

my unconscious was to give it creative control over the scene.

She stood in a charred field. It had once been a garden, but now everything was a husk. Smoke rose from the largest chunks of blackened debris. The sky was the color of fire.

I walked toward her. Her back was turned to me. I felt a kind of nostalgia at the sight of her black, wavy hair, blown gently over her back by the wind. She wore a black dress. I had seen it once before, at my grandmother's funeral. I was a child at the time, and had been fascinated by the texture of the sleeves. They were nylon and revealed no skin, but had an overlay of fishnets spiderwebbing along them.

As I got closer to my mother, I was struck by how tall she was. I only came up to her belly button. I looked down and saw that I was wearing a white pair of sneakers. Blue lights glittered along the bottom every time I took a step. These were my favorite shoes as a kid. I had them when I was about nine years old.

I approached my mother not as a man, then, but a boy.

Something flashed in the sky. Floating ten feet in the air was the woman I'd been dreaming of, the Angel of Death, fiery hair billowing, an eager light in her amber eyes. She was maybe

fifteen feet down the field. I realized my mom had been staring at her.

When my mother noticed me she frowned. I remember her frowning that way whenever she saw a bug. It was a studious look, with a hint of annoyance, as if she thought there were better things to study. Her eyes here were totally black—no whites, no irises. They held darkness that reached to infinity—like Ravana.

"What did I do?" I found myself asking her. My voice was high and whiny, as it was when I was a child.

The Angel in the sky spread her arms and a harsh wind kicked up. A blanket of fresh smoke streamed from the palms of her hands and covered the sky. My mother opened her mouth to respond to me, but the smoke rushed to her throat and choked her.

I fell into the dry dirt. The smoke didn't seem to be interested in me, down so low. It wrapped around my mother like a cloak. The Angel was gone, or hidden behind the veil of blackening smoke. I could only vaguely see my mom's pale skin through the angry funnel, the whites of her teeth as she strained for breath. I started crying. The smoke was taking her. My question would never be answered.

My last glimpse was of her hands reaching up to her throat. She never managed a

sound. The smoke thickened and swallowed the rest of her. Soon, the wind scattered the funnel over the field, and she was gone.

I opened my eyes with a jolt, like I'd awakened from a nightmare. There were real tears on the floor. They reverberated with little waves. The air was vibrating now, buzzing like a giant hornet. I staggered back and saw Ravana float upward. Golden light poured from her womb.

The ambient noise of the hangar stopped. My technicians gasped and murmured to each other. I was soaked with sweat, shaking like a hypothermic. My body screamed at me to run. But Mr. Gray was still there, watching.

I took a step forward, toward the light. I heard myself whimper. Another step, and the light hit me. Ravana was about ten feet overhead. With a lazy half-spin, she centered her womb above me. My body tingled, though not uncomfortably, and I became weightless. I floated up through the light and straight into Ravana. Someone screamed. I screamed.

Ravana's womb closed under my dangling legs. Gravity returned as the beam of light that bathed me dissipated. I landed on a soft floor that appeared to be made of white grass, or something like grass. I bent and ran my fingers through it. It really did feel like a lush,

well-kept lawn. But it was the color of milk, and the “soil” it grew from felt like skin.

I looked around. It was impossible. It was a *forest.* There was a *forest* inside Ravana. It must have spanned hundreds of acres—far too large to fit within the twenty-five foot circumference of her saucer-frame. All the trees and shrubbery were pure white, like the grass, and the roots of them all tangled and melded together, weaving an intricate pattern in the “flooring.” It was an organism.

It’s not right, I kept thinking. I stood there for several minutes, just shaking my head. This could not be right.

Her voice came out of the void, sourceless, as much inside my mind as outside. It was the regal, stern, loving and wrathful voice of the Mantis-Goddess. *What do you want it to be?*

The question surprised me. It implied that I had a say. As soon as this thought passed, the forest was colored. The leaves and grass greened, the soil browned, and flowers of lavender, crimson, and gold blossomed in a wave of color to the horizon. I gasped at the beauty of this sudden unfoldment.

The sound of a stream gurgled into existence. I turned and saw a log cabin set aside the crystal, flowing water. It was small,

even meek, but it had an artful charm to it, as if fragility were an intentional part of its design. It reminded me of me. It was the house of my soul. I knew, the way you know in dreams, that I had to enter it.

It felt even smaller on the inside. There was a cramped living room and a closet of a bedroom. No toiletries or running water, no electricity. The smell of wood was thick. Dust swirled in the little beams of light that shone through the cracks in the walls. The only furnishing that was in any way modern was the black, high-backed lounge chair in the center of the living room. It seemed out of place. It was a throne, and this place was a peasant among houses.

I went and sat in it anyway. The second I did, I was bathed in another ray of golden light. I could no longer feel my body. My eyes fluttered shut. All I could sense were vibrations. Everywhere. I started to panic.

Ravana's voice that wasn't a voice rang out again. It soothed me. *Relax. We are one now. You are with me. You have done what you must. Open your eyes again and see.*

I did as instructed. What I saw was Hangar Fourteen. I was floating near the ceiling. *We* were. We looked down at dozens of upturned faces. Mr. Gray was among them,

standing exactly where he'd been. I wondered if he was smiling, but I couldn't be sure.

We are together, Ravana repeated. *Concentrate on your flow of feelings, and we will act as one. Begin slowly. Gently.*

Possible commands leaped to mind. Left, right, up, down. All were equally plausible. I could guide Ravana as naturally as I could walk.

We moved *very slightly* to the right (Ravana was still in the grip of the crane that held her) then back again to the left. It was organic and effortless. I felt the faint wisp of air on Ravana's flank like it was my own skin. It was disorienting. After a minute, it was hard to remember whether she was the one dangling from the crane or if it was me, sitting naked in the claws of it.

They have seen enough, Ravana said. *Land now. The real work shall begin tomorrow.*

We drifted slowly downward and relaxed into the claws of the crane. With a flash of thought, I returned to "myself," sitting in the chair in the log cabin. I got up and walked again with that strange, intuitive certainty that I had thought was only possible in dreams. It seemed to be the norm inside Ravana. I knew I had to walk to the center of the "forest," where I first came in.

Once I did, my body tingled again. A stream of golden light brought me gently to the ground—the *real* ground, in the hangar, outside of Ravana. There was no sensation of sinking through her grass or squeezing out of her womb. There was only the tingling of the light, and then a shift from inside to outside.

Ravana's light went out, and her wasp-like buzzing faded. Despite the size of my audience, I had never heard the hangar so quiet. My techs looked at me like I was the alien. If I had tried to impart some cosmic message, they would have listened.

Mr. Gray gave a firm, satisfied nod. "*Excellent* work, Mr. Maurus. I will see to it that saucer six is transported topside. Be ready in twenty-four hours. It is time for a proper flight test."

He strode across Hangar Fourteen in his dauntless way, hands clasped behind his back. Normally, the sight of Mr. Gray commands all the attention. His appearance in any workplace in The Underground is an Event, an Occasion. Now, nobody glanced at him. My techs didn't even see him leave. All they did was stare at me. None of them could muster a word.

Neither could I. I was as dumbfounded as they were.

But suddenly, I smiled. Topside. Tomorrow, I would see the sun.

Are you really asking me that? Could anything have made me forgive my father? No. Nothing. Some people are irredeemable. If I could set him on fire again I'd do it more slowly. By the inch. You don't need to worry about me getting any kind of conscience, if that's what you're getting at. I have enough rage to pull on, and enough sense to control it. I'll do my duty for years.

-From Session 8 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 08

I waited until sunrise to hit Alice. Hadn't slept in twenty-four hours. Got nauseous after Carnell's house and threw up everywhere. Once that passed I drove to her drab ass neighborhood. Wanted to catch her before she saw any news.

I parked in her driveway. Bad form. Should have been more discrete. Oh well. Damage was done, so I strolled right up to her front door. Wasn't locked. I let myself in.

There were no decorations anywhere in the house. Everything in there had a *purpose.* Nothing was customized—cabinets stored things, sofas were sat on, countertops were bare. All the walls were gray, the furniture black. White carpeting over the floor. It was like I walked into a black-and-white movie. On one side of the living room was a massive bookshelf. Covered the whole wall. On the other was a flatscreen television covered in dust. The only color in the entire place was from a few of the books. It was weird and disorienting.

The couch was in the middle, facing the front door, and she was sitting on it. She'd already seen me. There was a binder in her

hands. It was beige, unlabeled. She flipped through it casually and glanced up at me.

I closed the door and locked it. Alice went back to turning pages.

"You're not what I expected," she muttered. There was that voice. Deep and stern. If she gave me an order, I'd want to obey it.

I was careful with my words, like you'd be with a celebrity. "What did you do expect?"

"A man," she chuckled. Without looking up, she grabbed a glass of wine off the end table next to her. She sipped it in a calculated way. The amount of liquid that went into her mouth was deliberate, like every sip she'd ever taken of anything was the same. She was interesting to look at in general. Stark white skin, sharp, witchy features. Skinny as death. Her black dress, with its fishnet sleeves, was oddly formal. Hair was deep black, with only a few wisps of gray. You wouldn't think she was sixty, but she was.

"What are you looking at?" I asked her.

"The ungrateful past." She raised her glass in toast without looking up.

I stepped fully into the room. "I'd like to see it."

There was a glass coffee table between us. A bottle of red wine stood on it. Alice set her binder down on the middle cushion and

reached for the bottle and refilled her glass. Now she really looked at me, for real. I felt naked. Her irises were a wild grey, even silver. They almost blended in with the whites of her eyes. They unpacked me. I was a specimen in a lab. I was a thing squirming under her microscope.

She set the bottle back down on the coffee table so gently it didn't make a sound. "You'd like to know me, would you?"

I resisted an urge to look down, away from her. "I want to see what you're looking at."

She brought the rim of her glass to her nose. Watched me. "You think that will make your job *easier?*"

"It *is* my job."

"Is it! I assumed your job was to kill me."

I shrugged. "That depends."

Her eyes brightened. On anyone else, this facial expression would have come with a smile. But I didn't think this woman could smile. "Would you like some wine?" She asked.

I laughed.

She held out her glass. "Really. Have some. Incentivize me. Let me have one last drink with someone who really wants to *know* something. Someone *truly* inquisitive. Let me have that, and maybe I'll show you what I've got here without protest."

I kept my eyes on hers and reached for the glass. I took it in the tips of my fingers, from the top, careful not to make my wrist an easy target.

She didn't try anything. She let go of the glass and nodded her approval and turned and drank from the bottle. I took a long sip. It was good wine.

"Before you take that gun in your pants and use it on me," she said, "I would like to know how a girl like you gets into this line of work."

Self-conscious, I fingered the edge of my gun, sticking out above my ass. She couldn't have seen it yet. I guess it was reasonable to assume it was there, but I felt undermined. I live by a lack of transparency, and this woman saw right through me. I dropped my hand to my side. Now I was self-conscious of being self-conscious. She probably noticed that too.

"It's a long story," I said.

"We've all got those. Are you on a schedule?"

I grinned. "Loosely."

"Mm!" She swallowed her wine. "Then we've got time. Let me hear it. Who do you think I'll tell? You're the last person I'll ever see in my life."

I giggled. Felt a bit of the wine already. I don't get the chance to drink much. "Well," I said. "My husband kinda got me into it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your husband kinda?"

"Kinda. He got recruited first. Out of the marines. He has talents. I joined up too and realized I also had talents. He vouched for me. His superiors roped me in. Not much to say about it."

"So it's a long story, but there's not much to say about it. Thank god you don't contradict yourself."

I giggled again.

She sighed and leaned back into the couch. "What I'm driving at here is the why of it. I don't need a play-by-play of the how. That *would* be a long story. But there must have been a reason. Was there no element of choice here? I take it you weren't sucked into this life without any acquiescence whatsoever."

"Choice is funny. I made some choices that got me here, yeah. It wasn't all fate. But would I have made the same choices if my fate had been different? Maybe. I think about it sometimes." Jesus. Alcohol had my tongue loose.

"Ah, indeed," she said with interest. "Whatever one might say about free will, our

choices are always constrained, at the very least, aren't they? Okay, well, by what? In your case, what were your constraints?"

I swirled the wine around in my glass. "Here's a good way to put it. I started off amateur. That wasn't a choice. But I chose to go pro with my talents."

She narrowed her eyes. "In what sense?"

"I killed my father and my brothers when I was a teenager. It wasn't a choice. I had to do it. After that, I chose to kill professionally."

She straightened and leaned forward again. "And why wasn't that a choice? That sounds like it would be a bitch of a decision."

"Because they were animals. And I couldn't get away."

"Mmm." She nodded her head slowly. Pondering. "My parents were hard too. Cold. Viciously critical. I never did a single right thing in my life."

"Eh," I shrugged. "Mom wasn't so bad. She was a victim too. Still is, really."

She took a long swig from her bottle. "Some scars never heal."

It was quiet for a bit. Not awkward, though. There was a sad togetherness to it that was almost beautiful.

“Well,” she said suddenly. “Why don’t you come sit down? You can have your look.” She patted the top of her binder.

Maybe it was the wine. I was far too comfortable. But I needed to know this woman. More than any of the marks I’ve had. I didn’t know why. I’d been collecting all these trophies from the dead and looking for something within them and always just missing it. Somehow, it felt like there, in that binder, was the end of my search. The Great Thing was waiting inside. My destiny.

So I sat down on the other side of the binder from her. I took my gun out and let her see it. I set it down on my lap and took the binder in my hands, left my wine on an end table.

It was another photo album. Filled with pictures of two boys. They got older as I flipped the pages. All the pictures looked like they’d been snapped when the boys weren’t expecting it. They were always involved with something. There were no cutesy, smiling pictures with mom or dad. I never saw anyone else. No one but the boys. One of them was typical. Sporty. Stomping around in the mud, playing with bugs and toy guns. He was stocky and solid. Dirty blond hair.

The other boy looked like a breeze would knock him over. He had Alice's skeletal frame, her black hair, her ghostly white complexion. He was always in a corner somewhere, tinkering with some gadget. In every picture he was surrounded by springs, coils, wires, circuit boards. In only one did he actually look at the camera. He looked about ten or eleven in that one, standing next to some kind of engine, grinning from ear to ear. He had the same crystal grey eyes as Alice.

"My son is a genius," Alice said. Her tone was fascinating. It was *bitter.* This wasn't a proud mom moment. She said it like his genius had robbed her of something.

"Where does he get that from?" I said as innocuously as I could.

There was a flash of fire in her eyes. Very interesting. It was like she resented the fact that I even asked the question, but was invigorated by her resentment. She was high on a last taste of spite, at the end of a life's worth.

"No one knows." Her voice was cool and even. "It's a big *mystery.* I assure you it did not come from his mediocrity of a father."

"Where's he?" I asked, flipping another page. "I don't see any pictures of dad in here."

She downed some wine. "Don't know. Divorced him five years ago. Then I moved out

to this wasteland of a state in the interest of a career for which I have also received no thanks. Left that wasteland of a man behind and haven't spoken with him since."

"Doesn't sound like he left an impression."

"He never left an impression on anybody. Or anything. He was remarkably unremarkable. And I wasted my life with him."

"What do your brilliant children think of him?"

"*Child,*" she corrected. "Brilliant *child.* Singular. My other son is a dunce. He takes after his father. They think nothing of him. They don't even know I divorced him. Why do you suppose that is, little miss thing?"

"I guess they find you both unremarkable."

She turned her blazing eyes on me. "They have plenty to remark about me, I can tell you. They've made plenty of remarks. Take another guess."

I chuckled. "I don't know."

"You're so curious," she flared. "You're the psychologist. You're the scientist here, gaping at the wonders of the human spirit. You want to know *so* badly. *Guess!*"

"Ungratefulness," I said quickly.

She raised her bottle and smiled. So she could smile after all. Looked deadly. Gorgeous. It didn't reflect in her eyes at all. More like a baring of teeth. I was sitting next to a hyena who had found meat. "Ungratefulness!" She agreed. "You create a soul, you feed them, you shelter them, you never lay a finger on them, and what do they do for you? They move away and ignore you. They go off and *earn.* Their *genius* makes them rich, and they share none of it with you. They do nothing to pay you back. Do you have children?"

"God no."

"Don't scoff too loudly, girly. I scoffed too once."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I didn't. But life happens. Life climbs on your back and fucks you as it pleases. It is not rational. We rationalize it, but this is only our defense mechanism; our great fantasy; our attempt to humanize a universe that doesn't *actually* make *any sense at all.* An insane universe. Life inevitably stomps on our rationalizations, our sense-making, like a dumb little boy running his muddy shoes on your carpet. All you're left with, when the smoke of reality clears, is madness."

I pursed my lips and nodded. "Spoken like a true madwoman."

She spread her arms in triumph. A few droplets of wine hopped out of the bottle and stained the carpet. “All humans are mad! That’s the big secret we’re all trying so hard to keep. I wish I’d known it at your age. Think about it.” She took a sloppy chug from her bottle. Some of it spilled down her chest. She leaned over the middle cushion and spoke with drunken sentimentality. “Don’t turn out like me. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Don’t waste your life trying to make sense of every little thing. Stop trying to *know* everything, to understand it all. You never really know anything. Certainty…” She wagged a long, bony finger. “That’s the root of our madness. Our illusions of certainty. The universe tries to cure us by humbling us. Reality gets off on upending all our certainties. Making mockeries of them. Do you get it? Do you hear what I’m saying?”

I kept looking at the pictures in the binder. “What I hear is you getting more and more drunk.”

She said nothing for a long time. Just stared at me. She leaned on her elbow, over the middle cushion, watching me flip through her pictures, her documentary of motherhood. I could feel her stewing. Her spite and resentment wafted over me like a cloud of body odor, released from all her “rationalization” by

the wine. That's when I realized that these photos weren't her way of remembering her kids. They were her attempt to understand them. They were a science thing. She was trying to rationalize the existence of her children because she couldn't bear the sheer *life* of them. She was trying to reason the emotions of motherhood into submission.

This really was the trophy to end all trophies. I had what I needed. I still didn't understand why, but I felt it. It was a certainty—fuck what Alice said about certainties. I *knew,* then and there, that my search was over. There was nothing more for me to collect.

So now what? What was I supposed to do?

My lips started to quiver again. I bit my tongue before they could get going. I blinked the burning sensation out of my eyes and turned another page.

It was the end of the album. There was one last picture: a cutout from some magazine. The headline read: MIRACLE WORKER IN THE AEROSPACE INDUSTRY - MEET THE MAN WHO WILL BRING US TO THE STARS!

"Ah yes." Alice propped her head up on her palms and peered down at the cutout. "There's Einstein. Behold the glory. The most recent image I could find of my brilliant son."

It was a black-and-white photo. He sat at a table covered in mechanical parts, chin resting in one of his hands, shy smile directed at the camera. Totally the stereotype of a mad scientist. Thick and unruly hair came down in shaggy waves over his eyes. An unkempt beard rolled over the dainty wrist he leaned on. Sharp features, like his mom. Intense. He *looked* like a genius. A super emotional one. His eyes had that tortured look. Despite his meek smile, they pierced the camera. Probably could have been handsome if he found a razor. Or a barber.

"When is this from?"

Alice pulled away, leaned into her arm of the couch. "The article is two years old. Three, maybe. Not long after that, he vanished from the Earth. Rumor has it he works for the government. No doubt working all his 'miracles' for our great military." She laughed coldly.

I squinted at the picture. I felt a weird pull to the guy. Not like I was attracted to him—he was the opposite of my "type." It was like curiosity, but deeper. More encompassing. It was a calling. Through Alice, I found what I was looking for. Through her son, I could understand it.

"What's his name?" I asked her.

She looked at me. Inferno in her eyes again. She saw my new fascination.

Her hyena grin came out. “Read it. There’s an *inspiring* quote from him at the bottom. It goes to the back of the page, where they credit it with his full name. It makes it very official that way,” she added with heavy sarcasm.

I scanned the article. At the bottom, the quote began: *While I’m flattered by all the praise for what I’ve done, I really don’t know how much credit I can take for it. People say these “revolutions” in engineering were my “ideas,” but I don’t know where these insights come from. It’s been that way since I was a kid. Always. It’s like the ideas are “beamed” to me from somewhere else. All I have to do is “tap in,” so to speak. Artists describe the creative process in a similar way, but you wouldn’t think that should hold for something as concrete as engineering. I don’t want to stray into mystical or spooky speculations, but I’m tempted to say my ideas are “given” to me by some…*

I had to pull the clipping out of its plastic sleeve and flip it around to read the rest. Was too absorbed in that to notice Alice swinging her wine bottle at the back of my head. Stupid. I didn’t feel it as pain, so much. More like a dull throbbing that registered a couple seconds after impact. I fell off the couch. Ears screamed with high-pitched alarm bells. Stars and colors flew

around under my eyelids, like in a cartoon. That was my existence for a while. Couldn't see or hear the real world. The universe was a migraine and a laser show.

My senses faded back in. I was wedged in the crack between the coffee table and the couch. There were bits of the bottle everywhere. My head had shattered it. Hair and back were sticky from the wine splattering over me. The neck of the bottle had landed—or was set down—on the edge of the coffee table, jagged as a knife. It rocked slowly from side to side, clinking rhythmically against the glass. Maybe I wasn't out as long as I'd thought.

Alice was in the kitchen. She hadn't grabbed my gun, like I would have expected. It was under my left thigh, barrel sticking out, clearly visible against the white carpet. She'd gone for the magazine clipping instead. She held a lighter to it and it went up fast and bright, alcohol having soaked the paper.

She flung the fire into the sink and shook pain from her hand and turned the faucet on and let it run. I made my eyes slits and tried to look dead. Watched dimly as she came back into the living room.

Now she came for the gun. She knelt over the coffee table and reached for my thigh.

Her elbow bent awkwardly to get into the cramped space.

I took her wrist and twisted it up behind her back and kicked out the knee she was leaning on. She fell face first onto the coffee table and I got up over her. On the way down, she managed to get her free arm over her head and grab the broken neck of the wine bottle. She brought it crossways over her shoulder and stabbed me just above my right breast, rolling slightly over her pressured wrist as she did and screaming from the strain of it.

I let go of her and fell back onto the couch, the piece of the bottle sticking out of me. I was more shocked than in pain. This old bitch had some acrobatics in her. She took advantage of the moment and got ahold of my gun on the floor. I was on her again before she could get a clear shot. I snatched her forearm and swung around over her back. Wrapped myself around her and held the gun out in front of us, trying to get my left arm around her throat. She launched herself up and pushed us back. The gun fired blindly. Two bullet holes appeared in the wall, a third in the TV. Cracks spiderwebbed over the screen.

I couldn’t get my feet set right. We kept staggering backward. We slammed hard into the bookshelf and paperbacks rained down on

us. The impact jostled her and she shot two more holes in the ceiling. I finally got my right hand over hers and pushed the gun down toward her stomach. Smoke trailed from the barrel and the stink of gunpowder burned my nose. Alice bent her knees and rammed her shoulders into my chest, pushing the bottle piece deeper into me.

Now the pain hit. I screamed. Must have lost more of my grip on Alice than she expected. Her arm flew out of my fingers so hard that she threw the gun into the wall and behind the couch.

I was burning with adrenaline now. Without the gun to worry about I was able to get my forearm on the back of her neck. I pushed off against the bookshelf and we barreled forward toward the coffee table again. I threw her down into it and her head shattered the glass. Momentum carried me and I fell and rolled and crashed into the TV stand. The television shook and fell on its face and dangled halfway off the stand.

For a few seconds, the only sound was the faucet running in the kitchen. Alice looked up. Two little rivers of blood flowed out of the sides of her mouth. Her wild hyena grin was brighter than ever. Her eyes were feral. She shook the glass out of her hair and stood.

"I have never felt," she gasped, "*alive* like this." She cackled, as hyenas do. "With someone trying to kill me!"

I got to my feet and pulled the bottle piece out of my chest. I raised the dripping end of it and held it out, dotting the carpet in red. "Then get over here."

Cleverly, Alice picked up the metal frame of the coffee table and charged me with it. Stupidly, I tried to slash around it. All I did was splatter her with blood. The end of it pummeled my chest as my arm sailed over the top. I was shoved back and bent awkwardly over the knocked over TV. I used the momentum to bring my knees up through the gap in the table, where the glass used to be, and kicked Alice across the room. She held onto the frame and landed with her limbs tangled in it.

I raised the bottle piece and stomped across the room. But I underestimated her quickness again. She got her feet under her and swung the frame at my wrist. I tried to parry with the bottle piece—more out of reflex than good sense—and it went to pieces, most of them flying out of my grip and clattering in the kitchen. The frame came back around. She aimed for my head this time. I caught it in both hands and we grappled with it, spinning each other around the room. She lost her grip and

stumbled back into the TV stand and sprawled over the flatscreen. She grabbed the TV and whipped it at me. The plug tore from the outlet with a bluish spark. I deflected it with the table frame. They came together with an odd crunch, one leg from the table impaled through the screen.

I dropped the heap. Alice pounced at me like a rabid animal. She raked her nails over my cheek and drew three bloody lines. I blocked her next swipe with my forearm and punched her in the abdomen. She staggered. I belted her once in the jaw, then spun and kicked her square in the chest. She was thrown and bent backward over the TV stand for a second before sliding to the floor. She wheezed. Her ribs were cracked. I thought she was done. But she still had enough in her to whirl her legs around and kick out the back of my knees.

I fell over top of her and got my hands around her throat. She took a fistful of my hair and wrenched my head back. Her other hand groped over the floor, feeling for some weapon, some advantage.

She found the power cord for the television and wrapped it around my neck. She let go of my hair and yanked the cord to the side with both hands. I gagged. Felt the cord break skin. Breathing became punishment.

Oxygen was made of needles. Alice snarled, bared her fangs. She was laughing. Tiny bubbles of blood popped around her lips every time she exhaled.

My hands waved, tried to get at her wrists. They felt distant. My vision dimmed. The world was slowing down. Vaguely, I felt my fingers wrap around a hand. They slid down to the wrist and pushed a pressure point.

Alice growled and dropped the cord. It slackened and I quickly got it over my head. I brought my forehead down and broke Alice's nose with it. She gurgled. Coughed fresh blood and spit it in my face.

I rolled to the side and wrapped the cord around her throat and pulled her on top of me. She kicked her legs desperately and reached for the cord. I pulled it tighter. When she realized she couldn't reach it she flailed her arms over her head and tried to claw my eyes.

My own throat was on fire. I wanted to pass out. I kept pulling. I craned my neck back, away from the darting nails. The arms in my muscles cramped and tore. Stars swirled in my eyes again. But I kept pulling harder. My tendons popped.

Finally, Alice went still and quiet. I threw her off me and coughed. I spent a long time coughing up blood. When I could stand again, I

fished my gun out from behind the couch and stuck it in my pants. Every part of me shook. My fucking lips started their fucking trembling.

Something trickled in the kitchen. I whirled around. In just a few minutes of chaos, I'd forgotten that the faucet was still going. The sink was overflowing now. Burned black remains from the magazine clipping floated on the surface.

I let the water run. I found the beige binder among the mess and tucked it under my arm. As I did, I took a last look at Alice. Her corpse grinned. Eyes were still manic and bloodthirsty. She had finally stopped rationalizing. In death, she laughed at the insanity of life.

I walked out of the house. My eyes blurred with tears.

What happens in these dreams of childhood? There's one I always have. I've had it for years. I'm in bed at night. Bright, almost blinding light fills the room. Weird little people surround me. They want to take me away, and I don't want to go.

-From Session 10 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 10

I killed her. Oh my fucking god, *I killed her!*

Jesus Christ, I can barely write this. I can't stop vomiting.

Okay. Okay. All right, I need to get this down. I said I was going to document whatever insanity was taking over my life and I will do it. I need to write this down in a coherent manner. Once I've done that, then maybe I can go crazy. But not one minute sooner.

Okay…

It started early. It was morning. Today. Earlier. I had a tasty breakfast of pancakes and bacon and biscuits. I felt good. Excitable. My flight test with Ravana was scheduled for late afternoon/early evening and I was looking forward to seeing daylight. *Real* daylight. Not all this horrific "happy lighting."

Lorelei came to my domicile. I hadn't seen her in the cafeteria, but she texted me shortly after breakfast and asked to talk. I invited her to swing by.

When she came in, I was relieved to see the warm, caring smile that was her trademark. She dressed casually in a black t-shirt and blue jeans.

“Oooh!” She crooned and bounced over to my work bench. “Cozy! I thought you worked in Hangar Fourteen all the time. I didn’t know you had your own lab at home, too.”

I smiled too, happy to see her feeling better. “I work everywhere.”

Her musical laugh traveled the room. She picked up the crystal cube. That damn impossible thing. She gazed into it and the reflection of her eyes sparkled inside, like sunlight on the ocean. “Amazing,” she murmured. “What is it?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea.”

She laughed again. “You don’t? What’s it doing in your lab then?” The cube turned in her dancing fingers.

“I’ve been trying to figure it out. But there’s nothing to make of it. I thought it was from one of the engines. But I can’t imagine what it would be for, except to be useless and confusing.”

“Mm.” She set it back down. “You’ll figure it out.”

That might seem like a casual thing to have said, a polite little nothing. But she said it with a conviction that most people couldn’t or wouldn’t have bothered with. I *felt* rather than heard her say it. Not only did she believe it, but

she made *me* believe it. Even in the smallest ways, it was her nature to uplift.

"So, how are you doing?" I asked.

She drifted around the room and studied it, the way you do in a new house—digging for what the place has to say about the person who lives in it. "I'm all right," she said as her eyes wandered. "That's what I wanted to come talk to you about."

"Is everything okay?" I remembered manners and added: "Can I get you anything to drink?" An odd pairing of questions, but sue me. I don't have people over much.

"Oh yeah, I'm all good. And no thank you." She stopped and turned to me. "I wanted to apologize."

I blinked. "For what?"

She bowed her head and chuckled. "What a guy. For the way I acted before. It warrants an apology and an explanation."

"We were both pretty rattled, I think. It was a strange day. In fact, I wanted to apologize to you."

Her eyebrows went up. "For what?"

I laughed. "Well. I got the sense I sort of…well, you and Ezekiel had been close before, I gathered. And I lost myself in there. And that made him…" I scratched my beard.

“We threw you to the wolves,” Lorelei said with disapproval. She scuffed the point of one of her worn black skater sneakers against the leg of my work bench. “It was only your second time with Ezekiel. We pushed you too much. It wasn’t fair. Anyone would have reacted the way you did. Actually, I think most people would have gone further off the deep end.”

“Would you like to sit down?” I motioned for the couch.

“Sure!”

We sat. I was on the end, leaning on one of the arms of the couch. She sat on the middle cushion, closer than I expected. Her perfume smelled like flowers, though I wouldn’t know what kind.

“I just got the sense,” I went on, “that I ruined things for you, in a way.”

“You did no such thing. I was upset, yes, and I acted abrasively with you. I was short and irritable. I’m sorry for that. And I want to explain myself.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I know.” She eyed me. “But I want to give you one. I don’t feel obligated to. It’s a free act. It’s a want. Not a need.”

For some reason, I blushed. “Fair enough.”

Her fingers interlaced over one of her knees. Happy lights glistened on her black nail polish as her thumbs waltzed together. “So.” Her voice shook a little. “Remember when I told you I cured cancer?”

I nodded. “That would be hard to forget.”

She giggled. “Yeah. It probably would. Well, when I discovered my cure and had my big breakthrough, I did something a teensy bit unethical.”

My eyes widened. “I’m sorry? You’re saying you used the cure for cancer *unethically?*”

She giggled again. “Depending on your point of view.”

“Please elaborate.”

Her smile faded. “You were asking about the picture in my living room. The one I kept looking at?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s of my sister and me. My sister had cancer. And when I found my cure, I used it on her.”

I studied her, tried to puzzle this out without asking the wrong question. “Did something go wrong, or…?”

She turned and looked over the top of the couch. Her eyes landed on that dumb crystal cube again. One of her knuckles

cracked. The fingertips on her knee turned white. “I used my cure on my sister before receiving any sort of approval or oversight. I hadn’t even published yet. There was no peer review. Nothing. I wasn’t authorized to begin human trials. But my sister and I were really close, and she was dying. I didn’t want to risk waiting. So, I…” She shrugged and sniffled a bit.

“I see.”

She glanced at me and smiled awkwardly, then looked at the floor again. “Somehow Black Book caught wind of it. I don’t know how they find these things out. I mean, it was no secret that I worked in cancer research, but I kept my breakthrough quiet. Probably all their Big Data spyware or whatever. I must not have been vague enough when I texted my sister. Who knows. Doesn’t matter. Anyway! Point being, they put two and two together. A guy in a fancy suit came to my house and flashed his badge. He said I could choose between a new job or prosecution. Obviously, I took the job, and you know the rest. They destroyed my old lab and all my work, and they brought me here.”

Lorelei closed her eyes for a minute. She took a few long breaths. “What I *didn’t* tell you before,” she said softly, “is, um…I mean, you

know how it is, when Black Book gets their hooks in you. It's so *quick.* One minute you're minding your damn business, the next you're here. In this fucking Underground. That's how it was with me and…" she swallowed. A tear rolled down her cheek. "I never actually found out whether my cure worked."

Understanding hit like a brick to the ribs. "Oh Jesus." As usual, I didn't know what to say. At a time like this, it felt criminal. "So," I tried. "So you've never…all this time, you've…" I gave up.

She looked at me and nodded. "Maurus, I've been here four years, and I still don't know if my sister is alive or dead."

"My god." I was useless. What could I say? I kept shaking my head like an idiot. "Lorelei, I'm so sorry. I don't know what to…" I couldn't bring myself to look at her. It was too intimate a moment, and I was too spineless.

I was shocked—paralyzed—when she took my hand and held it. I really stopped moving, like a rabbit.

"But this is the point," she continued, totally unaware of the effect so simple a gesture was having on me. "Ezekiel. You know what he can do to your mind. You know how he can make you see things. *Feel* things."

I nodded distantly. "Oh yeah."

She squeezed my hand. “He let me *see* her,” she said, voice hoarse with longing. “Every time I worked with Ezekiel, he let me check in on her. I *saw* her. It wasn’t like a movie or some shitty video clip in your phone. I saw her, live, in 3D, like I’m seeing you now. She was cured. She was happy. She was having a *baby!*”

Enough was enough. I had to quit pussyfooting and look at her. She was baring her soul to me. I only managed, at first, to look at our hands folded together. I realized, though, that I had been holding her just as tightly, all this time.

“But I feel,” I said, “that I took that away from you. I ruined it.”

“*No.*” She jiggled my hand in admonishment. “No you didn’t, Maurus, that’s what I’m trying to say here. You’re the one who made me *see.* You exposed Ezekiel for what he is. Because of you I was able to watch him objectively. Not clouded by my own…fantasies. And then when he did that thing at the end, that weird shockwave, that psychic…*whooof.*” She flung her head back to mime the event. “It showed me what he really is.”

“A liar?” I asked. “That’s what you called him. But I don’t understand that. When did he lie?”

"He *is* a lie. He's playing every one of us. You, me, Mr. Gray. Now I know it. We're pawns to him. We don't even understand the game. I don't think we *can* understand it. We're not capable, our intellects can't reach it. Why should we assume his agenda reflects our best interests? Why *would* it?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. "I get it. So now you aren't sure whether anything he showed you about your sister was real. That's what you're driving at? You are once again in the dark as to whether she's alive or dead."

She paused, then said softly: "Exactly."

I opened my eyes. Finally, I looked at her. Her eyes were sad, blue diamonds. They looked back at me.

"We're all alone in this, aren't we?" I said.

She leaned in, tentatively, slowly. It was really about to happen, and god damn it, I was going to let it. I would not turn away or make some excuse. I sat there and kept looking at her as she moved in. Her lips brushed mine, invited mine. I didn't know how to respond. I realized I should have closed my eyes. That's what I'd seen people do. My lips should have done something too. *Anything.* But they didn't. Lorelei tried to work with this for a few seconds, and it wasn't unpleasant. For me, at least. It was

electric. My head buzzed. Colors shown more brightly.

It didn't take long for her to pull away, though. She gave me a puzzled look, but she wasn't unkind. Never that.

I cleared my throat and laughed nervously. "I'm sorry. I just, uh…I've never actually…"

"Oh." She smiled gently. "That's okay. You want me to…?" She loosened her grip on my hand.

"No, no." I put my other hand on hers. "No, it's all right. I just don't really know how to —"

My phone rang. It was aggressive about it, vibrating in my pocket, tugging at my leg like a child would. Someone was calling. No one ever calls unless there's a problem. We're a text-first people, down here in The Underground. We keep personal human contact as minimal as possible.

I let go of Lorelei and pulled my phone out. It was Mr. Gray.

"Sorry," I told her. "It's the big man. Just a moment." I got up from the couch and answered his call.

"Mr. Maurus," he said in his toneless, serpentine way. "I'm afraid I have urgent news. Please meet with me immediately."

He told me to meet him at The Lift—the main elevator that takes you out of The Underground and back to the real world—so I figured there had been some major development with Ravana.

We hung up. I gave Lorelei a rueful smile. “I’m sorry to do this now. But I’ve been ‘urgently’ called away for business.”

“Oh, no worries,” she said, getting up to leave.

“But listen.” I moved closer to her. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I’m quite…well, for what it’s worth, I *am,* uh… interested.”

She giggled and brushed a strand of my hair aside. “I get it. Maybe we could get dinner tonight, or something. I have some time.”

“I’d like that. Very much.”

“It’s a date!” She touched my shoulder and headed for the door.

“And thank you!” I called after her. She looked back. “For being so…for being so patient with me.”

Her smile was so gentle and affectionate I could have fallen over. “It’s no problem, really. Let me know when you’re free later.”

“I’ll do that.”

Mr. Gray stood in The Lift with his arms crossed. He was alone. The fluorescent light from the elevator shown down on his hairless head and cast ghoulish shadows over his face. His suit was blacker than usual—everything black, from jacket to tie to undershirt. It was like meeting the grim reaper. His black eyes turned me over with the same kind of judgement you'd expect from the spirit of death.

"Mr. Maurus, thank you for coming." He pushed a button and the steel doors slid closed. With a gentle lurch, The Lift began its climb to the real world.

I grabbed a handrail. Being in a creaky little elevator with Mr. Gray invited claustrophobia. "What is this about? A development with saucer six?"

Mr. Gray hesitated for a tenth of a second. "Of sorts." He stared at the buttons on the elevator for a moment. Strange—he's the last person I'd expect to avoid eye contact. "Mr. Maurus," he repeated. "I do not relish having to tell you this."

The elevator shook. Its slowness was painful. "Tell me what?"

He looked up, straight into my eyes. "Your mother's name is Alice, yes? She works in the biotechnology industry?"

My heart spasmed. An icy dread swam my veins, as if my subconscious knew what was coming. “Yes…what about her?”

He didn’t blink. “She’s been murdered, I regret to say. Strangled in her home.”

It hit me all at once. There was no time delay, no surreal buffer where you wait for the Earth-shattering news to “sink in.” I choked on air and slid down along the wall to my knees. Mr. Gray didn’t react or offer condolences. He just watched without expression, arms crossed.

I tried several times to say something. But I couldn’t even croak. My mouth gulped at nothing, like a drowning person. After a minute, I finally wheezed a single word: “*Strangled?*”

“Yes,” Mr. Gray said casually.

My vision from the day before came back. I imagined her dying. I *watched her choke* on the black smoke of death. I saw her hands jump to her throat, her attempt to resist, to survive. It was real, and *I caused it.* Like a dream, I didn’t exert conscious control over the scene, but I did invite it. I didn’t cut off the stream of imagination, and I could have. Instead, I leaned into it. I *used* it to power up Ravana. It worked. My imagination had fueled a change in reality, and *now it was real.* Like my tech Edwin dissolved in acid, like Ravana’s poison, like coffee falling over Carnell’s neck.

I did it again. Only this time it was my own mother. *My own mother. I strangled her!*

I made a noise from an animal part of myself. I don't know if it was a scream or a sob. My vocal cords were in knots. I dug my nails into my face and tears streamed through my fingers. Mr. Gray looked down at me while I devolved into a lower life form. My body couldn't contain horror of this magnitude. It was bigger than me—*cosmic.* The universe had designed this torment as perfectly as a god would, this existential joke, and it subjected me to it on purpose. Worst of all, I had willingly played along. I basically volunteered. The thought that I could never undo this obliterated my senses. This was what it was like, I realized, to be driven finally insane; to feel that reality itself had no map. And even if it did, it was one I couldn't accept. Madness is to realize that the world is incomprehensible, while insisting that it must be comprehended. As I did and do.

"Now, Mr. Maurus," Mr. Gray said, calm as a Buddhist, not even raising his voice over my cries. "I realize you are in some distress. But it is paramount that you channel this wisely."

"AAAAGGGGHHHHHH!!" I replied.

"Indeed." He bent to his knee and knelt beside me, like he was talking to a child. "Your emotions are the key to that device above us. I

do not pretend to know why. But so it is. I must ask you, therefore, to *use* them."

I looked up at him. I had stopped howling, but I was still hyperventilating.

He nodded at the elevator doors. "When those doors open, it will be time to fly this hardware. Properly, in earnest. We must ensure it is duly fueled before doing so. So please, do not think of me as insensitive. I know this is not a happy moment. But it is for your own protection. You must allow these feelings to guide your experience so that nothing goes awry in the air. You are far too valuable to lose in a crash."

Imagine telling an airline pilot that, for his safety, he should be as emotionally unhinged as possible during his flight. That is effectively what Mr. Gray was telling me, and in our situation, it made perfect sense. Such is the insane nature of the cosmos. Reality *is* madness.

He patted me on the shoulder and stood up again and faced the doors. "Have no illusions," he continued. "What I have told you is true. This is not an attempt to upset you for the sake of the test. Your mother was murdered. I have documentation to prove it, if you like. But it will have to wait until after your flight."

I didn't need his proof. I *felt* the truth. Looking back, I knew it would happen the second I imagined it. I just didn't know that I knew it. I didn't want to. I still don't.

By the time The Lift reached the surface, my breathing had stabilized. I was capable of interacting with the world. But my horror, revulsion, and sorrow hadn't weakened. They would be with me, to some degree, forever. There was more to this than "mere" grief. A lifetime of complications with my mother had all exploded in an instant, as often happens with a death. But more than that—as if it weren't enough—were the existential concerns.

I've spent all night wrestling with them. What is this power I seem to have over "reality," and how can I control it? How can I stop "myself" from hurting any more people? Is it even "my" power? Or is it somehow possible only through Ravana?

There's an even weirder thought I keep tripping over. What if this is simply how "reality" works? Is there actually any difference between the inner world of the "psyche" and the outer world of "the universe?" Do they only *appear* to be different because we never dare to know ourselves? Is that what Ezekiel and the "aliens" are here to teach us? Is Ravana simply a tool for my education? It would jive with a lot of the

strange things Ezekiel said during my interview with him. Maybe humans are bulls in the glass shop of the cosmos, making a gory mess of the place because we don't (won't?) understand our power over it.

My thoughts about all this might seem pretty coherent and organized now, but I assure you, my head was a sloppy mess when The Lift finally juddered to a stop. All these wild ideas, and millions of others, were buzzing in my head like an angry beehive. The doors opened. I forced myself to stand and walk out of them. Mr. Gray led me through a relatively primitive security checkpoint—a guy with a badge and a gun signed us out—and then we walked through a tiny building that reminded me of a post office. I guess most outside security is concentrated on the perimeter of the base, since The Lift only operates by retinal scan anyway.

Sunlight beamed through the windows and steadied my nerves. Somewhat. We opened the door and went outside, and warm rays kissed me for the first time in years. It was semi-euphoric, which helped balance out my existential crisis. On another day, I would have smiled. I would have laughed. I looked up at the sky and thought how surreal it was for it to be so blue. Why should the sky be blue?

“Let us be off, Mr. Maurus.” I’d been so engrossed with daylight that I hadn’t noticed the shuttle waiting for us. We climbed into a military buggy and it drove us a short ways across the base to a hangar. Ravana was outside, waiting for me, sitting right on the bare concrete. She was a living shadow, bathing directly in the sun and reflecting none of it.

The buggy dropped us off and drove away. I was alone with Mr. Gray and Ravana, under the sky.

“This is it?” I asked.

“Pardon?” Mr. Gray said.

“Well, no personnel? No one to record any data? No one to take any kind of measurements?”

He gazed at me, eyes as black and bottomless as Ravana. “All that will come. We must understand that this machine can fly *reliably* before we bring in new eyes for your measurements and data. No sense in revealing a secret before we know it will bear fruit.”

“What about my technicians? They’ve already seen her.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Her?”

“I mean, *it.* The saucer. They’ve already seen it.”

Mr. Gray smiled. An *actual* smile. I saw the same gleaming, impossibly white vampire

teeth as I'd seen in my vision of his interrogation of Ezekiel. "Ah. Your technicians have seen her, yes. But they have not seen her fly. We do not understand the full capacities of this craft yet, do we? It may be capable of things that should not be seen by mortal eyes."

If Mr. Gray had a sense of humor, I would have thought that was a joke. But since he doesn't do jokes, he must have truly meant what he said. The work we were doing was divine, and he was a jealous god. Only the worthy could look upon our deeds.

"Now." He slapped a two-way radio into my hand. "Take this and begin. We do not know if it will even be possible to communicate by radio inside the craft, but we will try. If it works, you will describe everything to me, as it happens. If not, you will describe everything to me afterward."

I nodded and walked, eager to be away from him. I'm like a cat when in distress. I need to hide and lick my wounds. My emotions welled up again instantly, freshened by aloneness.

As if aroused by this, Ravana purred. Her deep buzz touched my heart, this time in a way that felt loving. She levitated as I approached, and the light of her womb drew me in.

I floated into her. A thunderstorm was beating on the forest inside her. Rain and hail pelted me. I swore and sprinted over to the log cabin, worried the snapping wind would blow it away. Inside and (relatively) safe from the elements, I tried the radio. Nothing but static. After a few seconds, it shut off completely. I smacked it with my palm and took the battery out and put it back in. No good. I stuffed it in my pocket and sat down in the lounge chair that was Ravana's control center.

I fell into a trance of warm vibration immediately. A dense cloud of feminine energy enveloped me. I was a child in mother's arms. But not like my mother. This mother was tender and affectionate.

There now, came the non-voice of Ravana. *All will be well, child.*

It was obviously a trick. The art of the succubus is to tempt you before she steals your soul. If I'd been less vulnerable, maybe I could have resisted. But I was weak. After only a moment of struggle, I let her have me. I sobbed with relief, and with grief. I had never felt so loved. There was nothing to see but warm, drifting colors. They swaddled me in endless compassion. I was held by someone who would never tire of holding me; would never have better things to do than be there for me. I wept

even harder. It was a feedback loop of catharsis.

This seemed to go on for hours. It ended all at once, like snapping out of a dream, and then we were all business. I opened my eyes and saw the world outside. We were hovering a few dozen feet above the ground. Mr. Gray stood down on the concrete, looking up at us. He held his radio to his ear.

It didn't look like he'd moved. Had it only been a few seconds since I'd entered Ravana? That couldn't be.

Time and space are not what you think, she told me.

You change it somehow? I thought back. *Contort it?*

Spacetime is like water. Think of this craft as a tub. You control the faucet.

Now that I had stopped fighting the entry of Ravana's thoughts into my head, I noticed a qualitative difference between her "talk" and Ezekiel's. Ezekiel's telepathy was invasive; it came from *without,* whereas Ravana's came from *within.* Ezekiel *felt* like another person. Ravana felt like a part of me—like a character I'd imagined. Her words bubbled up from my unconscious like any random thought.

I floated Ravana down a few feet, then up again, getting a feel for her, like you would with

a new car. It was so effortless I laughed. What I thought, she did. I didn't even have to *think.* Not the way we understand it. I moved her as naturally as I move my arms. Ravana was a part of my body.

Despite my chaotic emotions, I was exhilarated. Birds weren't this free. The sky was mine. The world belonged to me. I looked at the mountains in the distance. The jagged peaks were like open hands, letting that gorgeous sky flow through them just for the pleasure of the feeling, like children playing in water.

I wanted to be there, and I was. There was a minuscule blur of movement, and suddenly Ravana and I were hovering between two of the peaks. We were miles from the base, but we had traversed the distance in an instant. The G-Force alone should have been deadly, with a maneuver like that. I should have been meatloaf splattered on Ravana's walls. But I didn't experience the slightest discomfort.

It is not we who move, Ravana said, answering my confusion.

It's the space around us, I realized. If Ravana could bend space at will, then she could effectively move without moving. She didn't need to "go from" from point A to point B. She simply warped the space between them. To an outside observer, she would appear to

"travel" at tremendous speeds—potentially even faster than light—without herself having moved an inch. It wouldn't even violate any laws of physics this way. Her miracles were perfectly natural.

I zipped back to the base and swooped down in front of Mr. Gray. The stunt brought him dangerously close to smiling again. The sun on Ravana's hull (body?) was invigorating. I *felt* it! It was like my own skin. I took off and flew leisurely around the base and savored the wind.

We need nothing now, Ravana said seductively. *We are together, and we are complete. Thus, we are free.*

Her tone horrified me. She made it sound like we'd crossed some kind of threshold. Like there was no going back.

Can we not be complete alone? I said.

Of course not. You need me.

Her nonchalance set me off. *My mother is dead,* I snapped. *Two people,* dead. *Maybe three! Carnell possibly, definitely Edwin, and definitely my fucking mother. They're* dead, *and it's because of you.*

The fury of a goddess cracked like lightning. Her voice was thunder. *I AM YOUR MOTHER!*

I shrank back, like a frightened child. I took Ravana down and hovered in front of Mr.

Gray again. *Let me out.* I tried to sound fierce, but it came out a whimper.

You think you can escape me? She rumbled.

Yes. You can't keep me in here forever. I'll die.

What does a mother do but nourish her child? I can provide your every need. You needn't even fear death when you're with me.

What? You're the fountain of youth now?

Mortality is a facet of time, little one. I told you, time is not what you think.

The thought was Hell. I couldn't imagine it. Trapped in Ravana forever? Unable to age, unable to die. This was what she wanted from me? Why?

Let me out, I demanded.

You cannot escape me, she sang.

I can if you let me out!

No. Not even then. Because it isn't what you want.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT I WANT!

You think me a trap? Where are you now? In your Underground? Do you live now in the freedom you covet? Or did you find it with me, here among the clouds and stars?

I stammered. *I…just let me out, god damn it. You're a murderer.*

She snickered once. I got an image of giant tentacles unwrapping me. I opened my eyes and found myself sitting in Ravana's cabin.

I bolted out of the chair and sprinted to the opening of her womb. She released me without any trouble. I floated gently down to the concrete, met by the fathomless black eyes of Mr. Gray. Some relief that was. He was waiting to escort me back to his dungeon.

The only thing more terrifying than Ravana and her seduction is the possibility that she's right. Is reality just a winding psychic labyrinth with no exit? I left Ravana's Hell only to enter another.

Mr. Gray called the buggy to bring us back to The Underground. As we pulled away, Ravana whispered: *Soon, you will return to me, little one.*

Soon, you will want *to.*

I said you don't have to worry about it. Not with me. It's not like I don't have *guilt or empathy. I just don't trust them. They're addictions. Vices, like sex or meth. You give in to temptation and you always regret it.*

"The right thing" is a trap. Every time I've done it, I've been fucked. Never again.

-From Session 9 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 09

I was naked, sitting on the edge of the tub in the hotel bathroom, putting a needle through my stab wound. My blood dripped into the water and spread into clouds around my feet.

Mr. Gray called. I twisted around to my phone on the countertop and put it on speaker.

"Miss Arae," he said flatly.

I leaned back over the tub. "Yes sir?"

"What has happened?"

"The mission is accomplished, sir." I pulled the thread of my first stitch.

"Indeed. It was accomplished rather… messily."

"In what sense, sir?" I stuck the needle through my skin again. Worked it up gently with two fingers.

"In the sense that your handiwork is now a matter of local news. As we speak, I am working with my contacts in the media to ensure it does not reach national headlines."

"Yes," I said, sewing myself shut.

"Yes? I should hope you have a good deal more to say than that."

“There were unforeseen circumstances. Things are fluid in the field, sir. A plan and an active situation are two very different things.”

He paused. “I will ask you to dispense with the vagaries, Miss Arae, and tell me precisely what happened. Your orders were to make things appear natural. Accidental. This should not have been a problem. You’ve managed it dozens of times before.”

I closed my eyes, held the thread still. “The mark caught me off guard, sir. She wounded me. Things escalated.”

“Just how did she manage that? Why is it that you allowed her to get so close? It is your aptitude for stealth that has made you so valuable. We are not in the movie business. The idea is *not* to make a scene.”

I sighed and looked out into my room. Alice’s photo album was on the edge of the bed. “She had something I wanted.”

“What did you say?” He heard what I said.

“Information,” I said quickly. “I thought I could get more information out of her.”

He was quiet for a while. I kept stitching. Weirdly hypnotic thing to do. The pain of it gives you a focus. It’s always been relaxing to me.

By the time Mr. Gray spoke again, I’d almost forgotten he was on the phone.

“Gathering information was not a part of your assignment. The time for intelligence had passed. Your orders were clear and precise. You had no license to deviate. You had already stretched things with the doctor. Gas leaks are loud and dramatic. It is workable if not overused, so I was willing to overlook it this once. Now, however, coupled with a crime scene in the same neighborhood, mere blocks down the road—“

“I understand, sir.”

His voice rose very slightly. You could barely notice it. But for him, it was a big deal. “You do *not* understand. If you understood, you would not interrupt. If you understood, you would not have deviated from my instructions.”

“I apologize, sir. I take full responsibility for what happened.”

He softened again, which was somehow more chilling. “I should hope you do. You have been my little gem for so long. It would be a great pity if you began to lose your shine.”

“I agree, sir. Do you have additional orders for me? Perhaps I should return home to recuperate. Clear my mind for the next assignment.”

He didn’t pause. “I think you’ll recuperate just where you are. There may be another assignment in the area soon. But the situation is

still, as you say, *fluid.* I am not certain when, or even if, it will be necessary to clean it up. Still, if that time should come, I wonder if your husband may be better suited to assist me."

"No," I blurted, with a weird pang of jealousy. "I assure you, I can handle it."

"Without making another mess?"

"Without *any* mess. I can handle it, sir. I can handle anything."

He purred, like a mountain lion. "Very well, darling. Get some rest."

I hung up with Mr. Gray and finished patching myself up. After that I got into the bath. Leftover blood had the water tinted orange-ish. I threw on some more suds.

My phone rang again. Dolion this time. I put him on speaker and set my phone on top of the toilet.

"Where you at, you sexy skank?"

He got a giggle out of me. "Hi fuckhead. Are you home?"

"Yeah. I repeat: where the hell you at? I been looking for that ass. I checked everywhere. Even the washing machine."

Something about the gruffness of his voice, muffled by cellular tin, made me a little wet. "We had multiple conversations about this. Dumbass."

"What, Utah? You're *still* out there?"

"I am. For more information, please refer to our multiple text conversations on this very topic."

"Well, according to my notes, in the last of those text conversations you said: 'mission accomplished.'"

"I did."

"The way I was raised, 'mission accomplished' usually means: 'I'm coming home.' Hence the fact that I am now home, looking for that juicy puss."

I swished my hand around in soapy water. "Yeah."

"Sooo…what's the dealeo, bitch?!"

"I dunno. Boss man told me to hang out here for a bit. There might be more to do."

Dolion growled. "*I'm* boss man to you, baby. And I say you get that sweet ass home. Toot fucking sweet!"

"Sorry. Mr. Gray is boss man when I'm at work. Unless you'd like me to cuck you."

"Unless I'd like you to *what!*"

I laughed.

There was a loud crinkling, like he was opening a bag of chips. "All right fine. Distance ain't a problem. I can get you all fired up right now."

"Oh yeah?"

He crunched on his snack. “Mm-hmm. My mission was accomplished too. You wanna hear what big shot said to me right before I greased him?”

“Um.” I stared at the floor tiles for a minute. Bright white, smooth linoleum. There were a few small drops of blood I hadn’t noticed before. They were turning brown, drying.

“Um?” He said. “What does that mean? You’re gonna love this shit. This guy was such a fucking vagina. He was a *beggar.* Big shot colonel, career military, and he starts pissin’ himself and whining and talking about ‘I have money!’ You know what I did?”

“Actually, babe, now isn’t really a good time.”

“The fuck it isn’t. What do you have to do? Do you have a date? Oh my god, you *are* cucking me!”

He was being funny. I wanted to laugh. But my lips started quivering. My throat tightened up. “Sorry. Maybe later. Right now I’m —“ I choked. Tears welled up. I tried to blink them away. A few made it through and dripped into the bathwater.

“*What?* Are you having a stroke over there?”

"No," I wailed. "I'm just…" I covered my mouth. I couldn't stop it. I started bawling. It just exploded out of me.

"Hel-llooooo?" Dolion yelled. "What the fuck is going on right now? Are you *crying?*"

"No!" I sobbed. The tears were pouring. I couldn't breathe. I got my air in short, spastic hiccups. I looked at my blood drying on the floor. For some reason that made it worse.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Dolion was asking. "Hello? Jesus. What is actually wrong with you?"

I couldn't answer. Faces flashed in front of my eyes. Ghosts, haunting me. Jared Nauls. Miles Carnell. Alice…all that blood streaming out of her mouth, the manic fire in her eyes when she choked me.

And then that old woman. Mrs. Carnell. Her round, innocent face squinting into that spare room, looking straight at me in the dark and not seeing me. I couldn't take it. She was looking at me again, behind my eyes, right there in that bloodied hotel bathroom.

I cried harder. My lungs burned. Thought they'd collapse. Eventually, I blacked out.

I've had those dreams as long as I can remember. The weird beings in my room. They all follow the same narrative pattern. That brilliant light floods my room and carries me up. I float toward the wall and brace myself, thinking I'll hit it. But I go right through. Like it isn't even real. Or like I *am not even real.*
My panic wakes me up at that point. I do not *want to see what's on the other side of the wall.*
-From Session 11 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 11

I didn't get dinner with Lorelei tonight. I should have. But I couldn't let her see me like this.

Bohm got me instead. He messaged me and said there had been another development with Ravana's venom. I could have made an excuse and shut myself away. But morbid curiosity is a strange and powerful force. I've never been more terrified of Ravana. I've also never wanted to know more about her.

I guess our relationship has always been like that, to some degree. Ambivalent. I'm as possessive of her as I am revolted by her. Love is weird like that.

This isn't *love,* though. Why did I even use that word? I bet *she* did. I've realized I can't be sure which thoughts are mine—mine *alone*—and which are hers. Ravana is powered by the psychic link we share. The connection only seems to "come alive" when we're flying, or preparing to fly, but why should I assume that's where it stops? Is telepathy affected by distance? How the hell should I know? There's no science for this.

But it would explain everything. All the horrific "coincidences" in my life started with

her. The dark places my mind wandered into—all my violent fantasies with Carnell and others in the cafeteria, with Edwin in Hangar Fourteen—coincided *directly* with breakthroughs in Ravana's case. I've never been prone to murderous thoughts. I'm a passionate and moody person, easily frustrated, and I admit I can be a bit of a snob. I'm socially passive and don't engage well with others. But I have no history of wishing physical harm to people. Not until Ravana.

So what does that mean, as far as my relationship with her? If I went with her and granted her wish of companionship, what would happen to me? What would happen to my soul?

I keep coming back to one word: evil. It's not a word that ever made sense to me before. I'm a man of science. The concept of "evil" isn't empirically robust. But I don't know what else to call this psychic darkness. Ravana inspires malevolence in the same way that bees pollinate.

Obviously, a tangible incarnation of evil is kind of a scary thing. Some people enjoy fear, as a thrill. I'm repelled by it. I am not a daring man. Thus, Ravana repels me.

And yet…and yet…

Is anything more *curious* than evil, even to the most "good" among us? Why are villains

more interesting than heroes? Why do we watch documentaries about serial killers? Why are our favorite stories about violence and death and "glory" found in battle?

Because evil lives in all of us. And we are *tempted* by ourselves.

I suspect this is why I went to see Bohm. I wish I could blame Ravana and say her subliminal voodoo made me do it. But that feels too convenient to be true. When I actively *do* something, can I blame anyone but me? Who *is* "me?" What is the boundary of that word?

Fuck. I have to stop. My life is a series of unanswerable questions.

"Hello, my friend." Bohm greeted me with a real smile. Now he wore an orange kasaya, like the Buddha. His peace and compassion were radiant as ever, but he was oddly subdued. I expected him to be more excited, considering a "development" with his favorite new chemical.

He ushered me through his lab and to his version of a living room. He had a leather couch that looked like it had never been used, and probably hadn't. I sat down on it. There was no TV. There were only bookshelves. Dozens of them, an impossible amount. No one could read so many books. Kitty-corner from the couch was a wooden writing desk, covered in more

books, scraps of paper, and mounds of his notes. There were even books strewn about his bed, which was a small, disheveled cot set next to the desk.

A glass worked its way into my hands. I looked down and saw water inside, saw Bohm's brown fingers leaving the rim. "Drink that please," he said. "You look undead."

I muttered some vague thanks and sipped. Bohm dissected me with his eyes. There was no trace of judgement, but he did seem to be reevaluating me. I was a new person to him, not quite the man he had known.

"Maurus, are you all right?"

"Yes."

He shook his head without blinking, his eyes never leaving mine. "No you're not."

"Oh, no?" I laughed, though nothing was funny, which didn't make me look all right. "Well, thank you for alerting me."

"Mmh." He finally stopped staring. He went and grabbed the chair from his desk and spun it around and sat across from me. He folded his hands and scanned me again, saying nothing.

I fought an urge to weep. Sitting with a man as profoundly honest as Bohm is cathartic. It's almost impossible to be around him and maintain the lies you tell yourself to avoid

unpleasant feelings. Bohm, I realized, is Ravana's opposite. If she is Evil, he is Good.

I focused on his gray beard and the clear, dark skin of his face. Anything to avoid his eyes. If I looked into them, I would burst into tears. The goal was to be casual.

"So," I probed. "You said there's been a development?"

He nodded. "With your saucer's venom, yes."

I waited. He didn't say anything else. I raised an eyebrow. "And?"

He finally broke, sort of. He chuckled softly and leaned forward. "The development is that I figured out what it was for."

I narrowed my eyes. "What it was for…"

"Maurus!" He shouted so suddenly I jumped. "Wouldn't it feel better just to say it? Are you going to sit there and make me draw it out of you? Don't do that. It makes me feel like I'm putting myself above you. That would be detestable."

"Draw what out?"

He sighed. "I know what you did, guy. You took the venom I gave you and poisoned Dr. Carnell."

I blinked. "Oh." I genuinely hadn't realized he was working up to that. I should have known he would figure out what

happened, but I wasn't well. My head hasn't been clear a single time, since this whole saga began.

"'Oh?' That's all I get? 'Oh?' You sound like a bird." He laughed, finally. One of his glorious belly laughs.

I ran my hand over my face. "Well, what do you want me to say?"

"*Anything.* I want you to *talk* to me, man. I want you to tell me what's going on with you. I don't care what it is. I'm not wagging my finger, here. I'm not accusing you and I'm not angry. I can tell you've been in a bad place lately. I just want to understand."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Bohm, even I don't understand it."

"Understand what? Why you did it?"

"*Anything,*" I barked, echoing him.

He was quiet. I looked up and saw him frowning.

I tried to lower the temperature of the conversation. "How did you find out?"

He threw his hand up. "It wasn't a puzzle. You've ranted and raved about that doctor in several of our visits. I had never heard you speak with such venom. Pardon the pun. Then, you ask for poison, and not a day later Carnell goes down with a heart attack. Did you think I

wasn’t aware of the cardiovascular strain my poison might induce?”

“Ah.”

“Ah,” he mimicked. “So what is the rest of it for?”

I gulped more water. “The rest of what?"

“The venom, damn it! You asked for two different doses of it. Given his body weight, I assume you gave Carnell the larger dose.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” I asked. “Is he dead?”

“I have no idea. Answer my question.”

I sighed and fell back into the couch. I shook my head before answering, thinking how crazy I must have sounded. “I don’t know yet.”

He gave me a dull stare. “You don’t know yet.”

That’s when I broke down. I bawled like he was my therapist. It all just erupted. I told him everything. Not just the poisoning of Carnell and why I did it, but my meetings with Ezekiel, my psychic bond with Ravana, my twisted fantasies-turned-realities, my visit with Ravana as a Mantis-Goddess, her apocalyptic vision, her instructions for the venom, Ezekiel’s strange talk of my mommy issues being connected with the fate of the universe, and then the vision of my mother’s asphyxiation, and how it coincided with her actual death. I talked about my fear

that I had some power over reality that I didn't understand and couldn't control, and how Ravana wanted to take me, and to keep me.

Bohm took all this like a saint. He listened intently without interrupting, or showing any sign of disbelief. Unsurprisingly, he was quiet when I finished. He leaned back in his chair and pondered for several minutes, stroking his beard.

An understandable reaction. It's a lot to digest. I still haven't digested it myself, and I'm the one it's happening to.

When he finally spoke, he didn't offer any insightful theories or advice. What he said was so simple that I would never have seen it coming. "Maurus, you need to leave this place."

I felt an odd sense of relief at this reply, though I didn't know why. "What?" I asked, needing, for some reason, to hear it again.

Bohm spread his arms and indicated everywhere in general. "This place we're in. This 'Underground.' It's killing you, man. I've been seeing it for weeks, and obviously it's only getting worse. You need to get out of here."

I fidgeted with my water glass and turned it in my fingers. "And go where? I'm under contract. I can't even get topside unless I have someone with access to escort me. The Lift

operates by retinal scan." I chuckled. "My eyeballs aren't good enough."

"But Mr. Gray's eyeballs are perfect," Bohm said casually.

"Ah, so I should just politely ask to borrow his eyeballs? Just for the day?"

Bohm grinned, but his words remained serious. "Just this morning he escorted you topside for a flight test, yes? A wildly successful flight test, as far as he's concerned. He indicated that there would be further tests, did he not?"

"Yes, but what do you want me to do? Next time I'm up there, I just make a run for it? What we call 'topside' is still one of the most secretive and secure military bases in the world. All exits are heavily guarded. They'll *shoot* me, Bohm." I looked around the room suddenly and lowered my voice. "We shouldn't even be talking like this."

He batted his hand in the air. "We've got this place by the balls. You're the only one who can fly that saucer, and I've got pedigree. Seniority! I've been here twenty-five years, and I'm the only person who likes it here." He laughed. "Look, you're just venting right?" He winked. "And I'm just listening and joking around with you. You should know me well enough by now to take nothing I say very

seriously." He winked again and made an overloud giggle.

I shrugged. "Yes, I suppose it doesn't matter anyway, because it's a moot point. There's no way out of here."

"Jesus," he growled. "You really do have a lot on your mind, don't you?"

"What does that mean?"

"My point! You really missed it. It went sailing over your head again."

I made a face. I had no idea what he was talking about.

He raised his eyes in despair to the heavens. "Uggghhh, *Maurus.* You really think I was telling you to make some brazen escape attempt, next time you're topside, *from the ground?*"

"Where else?"

"DUDE!" He yelled. "You're going up there for a *flight test!*"

"Oh my god," I groaned, finally catching his drift. "Bohm, no."

His eyebrows shot upward. "No? Why no? You have the means of escape that no one else does."

"Ravana is the whole problem!" I shouted. My face was hot. "After everything I just told you about her, you want me to…and go where? Where could I possibly go? She's not

exactly inconspicuous. I can't just set her down in a parking lot somewhere and camp out. I'd be a *fugitive.* All the rumors running around this place about the things Black Book does to people who play with their secrets…what do you think would happen to me if I stole their most prized possession of all and ran off with it? I'd be Black Book's most wanted!" I took heavy breaths. I was angry, but more strangely, I was *offended.*

Bohm shrugged, nonchalant as ever. "How could they catch you?"

"WHAT!" I screamed.

Still, he was calm. "Sounds to me like Ravana can outrun anyone, and go anywhere."

I laughed wildly. "Okay, and what do I eat? Hm? Food and water. How am I going to get my *groceries,* Bohm? On the run from Black Book. They'll catch me in the supermarket and kill me."

"Supermarket?" He mocked. "What the hell would you need from a supermarket? Ravana told you she could sustain you. It doesn't sound to me like you'd need to eat."

I threw my glass at the wall beside me. It exploded and showered droplets of glass and water. "DO YOU—" I shot up from the couch, ready to detonate much as my water had. But I deflated immediately, watching Bohm sit there,

looking at me as quietly and simply as if we were talking baseball. His kasaya was now dotted with dark water spots.

"Shit," I mumbled. "I'm sorry."

He tipped his hand in a gesture of uncaring. "Don't be sorry for proving my point. This place is killing you. I've never seen you like this. It'd be a lot more productive if you explained *why* you're so upset."

I sank back down into the cushions again. I stretched my fingers, realizing I'd cramped them around the glass. "Well, for starters, you're nuts," I said. "I get it now. You're crazier than I am."

He laughed. "You wish. Unfortunately for you, my dear boy, I am hyper-sane."

"Well, if you're sane, that means you haven't *listened.* After everything I just told you about how Ravana wants to possess me, how she has caused horrifying deaths, you're really going to suggest that I just…give her what she wants? I should just crawl right back to her and let her take me?"

He folded his hands and leaned forward. "How certain are you that that's what will happen?"

Now I laughed, in complete bafflement. "What kind of question is that? After everything *else* that's happened!"

Despite my tantrum, and my increasingly bitter tone, Bohm never raised his voice or gave me any snark at all. “When you asked Ravana to land and let you out, she landed and let you out.”

“Mind games!” I snapped. “It’s just her mind games.”

“Just listen,” he said. “It’s your emotions that power Ravana in the first place, yes? And you can only fly because of your *psychic union* with her. Yet you speak of her as if she were some separate entity, some distinct character who is *doing* all this to you. Obviously she’s a part of you, man.”

I sputtered for a second. But I had nothing to say. Bohm kept staring at me, eyes brightening. He jumped out of his chair. He knew he was getting through to me and denied himself no pleasure in it.

“What’s the most terrifying monster of all?” He asked, like an announcer at a pep rally. “What is the most horrific, snarling, dripping, drooling, god-you-can’t-even-bring-yourself-to-look-at-it-demon in the entire universe?”

I stared back at him.

“What is it, Maurus?!”

“I don’t—“

“It’s *you* god damn it, *you!* It’s all the darkness you bury in the basement of your soul.

There's not one thing more horrifying for human beings than themselves. There are *devils* inside us. You even called Ravana evil tonight, did you not? You said she was malevolence incarnate. But she's *you,* man. *Everyone* is malevolence incarnate. But we're a lot of other things too. And what happens when we face the demons inside us, hm? What happens when we stop running from them and politely offer to have lunch with them instead?" He balled his fists and shook them. His eyes bulged with anticipation.

I couldn't help grinning. He got me. "They eat us?"

"AHHHH NOOOO!!" He bellowed. "Just the opposite. You become *more.* You become *bigger than them.*"

"All right, all right, yes." I waved him down. "I get it. The whole 'face your fears' thing. But this is more complicated than that."

He raised a finger. "First of all, excuses. Life is always complicated. But living it is simple. You always know what you have to do, on some level, at all times. The question is whether you *want* to know it, and whether you have the courage and honesty to do what you must. Secondly," he raised another finger and slapped the two in the palm of his other hand. "Let's not reduce this conversation to cliches.

I'm not telling you to 'face your fear.' I'm telling you to face *you.* You just happen to be deathly afraid of you. Also, it's not just me. From what you've told me, your alien friend wants you to do just as I've said."

I froze. "Ezekiel…"

"Yes," Bohm agreed. "Ezekiel. He told you that you needed to face your mother. He told you that you've made Ravana into some kind of symbol for your mother."

"Holy shit," I muttered, astonished.

Bohm threw his arms in the air and laughed, delighted with himself. "So you see? Everybody wins if you take my advice. You save your sanity by facing up to that saucer and flying away from this place. And the aliens save their plans for the universe. And by extension, I, Bohm, have saved the universe. You're welcome." He bowed.

I fell into a haze after that. I don't remember much more from Bohm's place. I probably thanked him for being Bohm in general and then scampered off, like a mouse. The rest of my night has been a whirlwind of planning and conjuring half-formed schemes and throwing them out. Gradually, I'm putting together a plan that may save everyone.

Make no mistake. I'd be nowhere without Bohm. He helped me put it all together, made

me see what I'd been missing. If it weren't for him, I'd be spiraling into psychosis at this very moment.

But he only circled the real solution. He didn't quite land on it, and I don't share his optimism. Ravana may be the way out of my dilemma, but it isn't so simple as facing her down and turning all her evil to roses.

The key here is Ezekiel. His people created Ravana. If anyone can tame her, it's him. If I'm stealing Ravana and leaving The Underground, then Ezekiel is coming with me.

I have to get him out of here.

EMPLOYEES OF M-FACILITY*: We want to hear from you! We appreciate your commitment to national security, and we understand the emotional strain your discretion and isolation can cause. On our intranet homepage, you will find our brand new Suggestion Box. Submissions are anonymous, so don't be afraid to be honest! Let us know what we can do to make the rest of your contract here at M-Facility more comfortable. We're a family here, and we want you to feel at home!*

We look forward to reading your suggestions. Thank you!

-M-Facility Administration—Message To All Employees

Emergency Analysis of EBE-10, "Ezekiel"—
Audio Transcript
Date: June 11, 2025
Medical Officer: Lorelei
Facilitator: Director Menzel Gray

Lorelei: When did the attack begin?

Gray: Just under an hour ago.

Lorelei: And he's been unconscious ever since?

Gray: That is correct.

Lorelei: Hm. **[sound of latex gloves]**

Gray: I do appreciate you coming by to check on him. Despite your feelings.

Lorelei: Oh? **[pause]** What feelings would those be?

Gray: You were disturbed by EBE-10's behavior in your previous liaison. You asked not to tend to him during his previous attack. You left the task to your medical technicians.

Lorelei: Right. That. **[sound of drawer opening, rummaging]**

Gray: I sense you are quite reticent to tend to him now, as well.

Lorelei: What gives you that sense?

Gray: Your body language. Your demeanor. You lack the zest and excitement that you normally bring to your work.

Lorelei: [sighs] Well, you pay me to do a job, right? There's no zest or excitement clause in our contract.

Gray: Perhaps not. **[pause]** Still, I cannot help wondering why things have changed for you so suddenly.

Lorelei: You said it. I was disturbed by Ezekiel's behavior. I suppose I now find him generally disturbing.

Gray: Just "generally?" Or has he perturbed you in some specific way?

Lorelei: [pause] Every second counts here, Mr. Gray. With all due respect, these questions are not germane, and I think we should get started.

Gray: By all means.

Lorelei: So, we are here in the EBE med-bay, M-level Five. It is 4:14 PM on Wednesday, June 11, 2025. Subject designation EBE-10, known as "Ezekiel" by caretakers, has suffered another spasmodic attack. Like previous attacks—of which there have been three—subject has lost consciousness. Subject has a pulse and displays light, labored breathing. No signs of hemorrhaging present…body temperature steady at one hundred degrees Fahrenheit—normative for subject species. Morphological presentation is previously documented, designation EM-4, colloquially referred to as "the Tall Whites." X-Rays provided by technicians show marginal increases in bronchial inflammation, or at least the analog of such, which is consistent with prognosis developed from previous subjects. Overall condition seems to be…

Gray: Lorelei?

[Static]

Lorelei: [clears throat] My apologies. Overall condition of **[static]** consistent with…**[gasps]**

Gray: Speak, please. Describe what is distressing you. Everything must be documented.

Lorelei: [choked sob] Ezekiel is…I'm sorry, subject has regained consciousness. **[static]** grasping my left hand. **[voice trembling]** psychic output increasing from subject. Telepathic signals **[harsh static]** normative levels. Subject is telling me…is…**[weeps]**

Gray: Go on. **[static]** difficult. You must—

Lorelei: YOU BASTARD! YOU FUCKING BASTARD!! **[equipment smashes, glass shatters]**

Gray: Be calm, Lorelei. Speak. What is **[static]** saying? What is he showing you?

Lorelei: I can't! **[sobbing]** I'm sorry, I can't. I can't do this now. **[static]** have to…please let

[static] out of here. **[harsh static]** LET ME OUT!!

What makes you ask that question? Do "anomalous experiences" ever coincide with my engineering breakthroughs? No, I'm not angry, I just can't imagine how you'd even…because yes, they often do. How could you know that? "Just a question?" This is far too specific and weird to be "just" a random question.

Fine, fine. Yes. They do. There have been several occasions—I would say at least half a dozen—when I've woken up in strange places, in the middle of the night. In the woods near my old house, in the car miles from home. Things like that. Every time this happens, a groundbreaking idea will just pop into my head the next day.

My theory is that it's a kind of sleepwalking induced by hyperactivity in my subconscious. My brain must go into overload as it invents some complex technology.

-From Session 12 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 12

Lorelei plowed through my door and screamed at me. “WHAT’S YOUR PLAN?!” I backed away and she charged me. “What’s your plan, Maurus? WHAT’S YOUR PLAN?! YOU HAVE TO TELL ME!!” She gasped and hiccuped after every shout, her face soaked with tears. She wrapped her arms around me and we staggered and fell back onto my couch. It was a perfect storm of clumsiness for me—I don’t have a strong physique to begin with, and I’ve never had a woman leap into my arms before.

For several minutes, I just lay there, like I was dead. It didn’t occur to me until later that I should have offered some kind of physical comfort. Rubbed her back, stroked her hair, held her. *Something.* But I didn’t. I was in shock. She didn’t seem to mind. Maybe she didn’t notice. At first, she just kept repeating herself, sobbing into my chest and asking what my plan was. After a while, her cries softened. She stopped speaking, reduced to whimpers. Soon, she was asleep.

I lay under her and listened to her smooth, quiet breathing. My brain acted like a bomb had gone off. I didn’t move a single

muscle for twenty minutes. I barely knew my name.

As my senses returned, I inched out from under her. I was careful not to wake her, but it probably didn't matter. She was zonked. But I was in no condition to talk about what had happened yet. I needed to process it.

When I got to my feet, I stood beside the couch for another ten minutes and stared at her like an idiot. She didn't look comfortable. Her lower back was arched a bit and her face was smeared flat against the cushion, black hair splayed in a messy tangle.

A blanket. That was what she needed. I went and grabbed a spare one from my closet. It was an ugly vomit-colored thing, kind of thin, but it would do the job. I draped it over her. It came down awkwardly. One corner covered half her face. I folded that part back. Her left arm hung down, off the couch, and one of her legs was sticking out, but she was altogether covered. Was that it? A pillow wouldn't have hurt, I thought, but then I'd have to move her head.

What else? What do people do to care for other people?

I never thought of anything. I went to my work bench and started writing this.

I think she's waking up now.

When she sat up, she cradled her head in her palms and groaned like she was hungover. After a minute of that, she looked around, as if she'd forgotten where she was.

"Hello," I said.

She jumped and twisted around to look at me. (My work area is situated behind the couch. I try to keep leisure separated from business, but am rarely successful.) Her eyes expanded, then narrowed, trying to register what I was.

"Oh," she mumbled, then turned around again and buried her face in her hands.

I got up and walked around to her. "Can I get you anything?" She shook her head. "Water. Let me get you some water."

I went into the kitchen and got her a water bottle. I watched her over the countertop. She didn't move at all.

When I handed her the bottle, she sipped gingerly at first, then downed half of it in a few long gulps. She set it down between her sneakered feet and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders and sat rubbing her head, like she was ill.

My instinct was to say nothing. Let her speak when she was ready. Perhaps, in this situation, it wouldn't have been an unreasonable

strategy. But I was tired of being so passive. I was sick of acting like a scared hamster every time someone shared emotions with me. So I forced myself to lead the conversation.

"So, what was that all about?"

Lorelei took a sharp breath and glanced at me, then rubbed her eyes again. "I'm sorry about all that." Her voice was hoarse.

"There's no need to be sorry."

She chuckled. "I invaded your home and bombarded you with hysterical babbling. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I *tackled* you."

I laughed gently. "Lorelei, it's fine. I just want to know what's going on."

She smiled at me. Her eyes were puffy and swollen, she had no makeup, and was generally disheveled, but I didn't find her any less beautiful. Nobody smiles the way she does.

"What's going on," she said, "is that I'm losing my mind."

I snorted and leaned against the countertop. "Maybe we should start a club."

She laughed. "A club of lunatics? You feel like you're losing your mind?"

I shrugged. "This place makes everyone crazy, I think."

Her smile faded. She nodded and said nothing.

"So how about it?" I pressed. "Or would you prefer not to talk about it?"

"No, I…" She picked up the water bottle again and wrapped both hands around it. "I just don't know what to believe anymore."

This time, my habitual silence truly was the best approach. I gave her a moment to gather her thoughts, and she went on.

"I saw Ezekiel again," she began.

I perked up. "Really? Mr. Gray let you?"

She waved her hand, like she was swatting at a bug. "It isn't a matter of *let.* Him 'letting' me implies I wanted to do it. Ezekiel had another *health attack*. He was unconscious. I was called in to check on him."

The way she said "health attack" was odd. Her tone was mocking. I asked her about this.

"I think it was engineered," she answered. "Manufactured. He wanted to get me back in a room with him."

"What for?"

She sighed and squeezed the water bottle. It made crinkly screams of pain. "He 'awoke' during the evaluation and told me something. He said that…" She stopped. Tears

puttered down her face again. I realized she wasn't sad, but utterly furious.

"He said," she repeated, biting off every word, "that if I didn't help you with your plan, my sister's cancer would come back."

"Jesus." I wavered and gripped the countertop to stabilize myself. "Was it a threat?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Not directly. It wasn't 'do this or I'm gonna give your sister cancer.' You know how he is, with all his weird notions about the universe and the weirder connections within it. The vibe I got was more: 'Helping Maurus is the only way to ensure a chain of events that keeps your sister healthy.'"

I stared off and tried to digest that. "Huh." My eyes landed on that crystal mystery cube on my work bench.

"It might as well be a threat," she snapped. "It feels like blackmail to me. Because this 'plan' of yours must have to do with Ezekiel, right? I seem to remember you saying that we have to 'help' him, or something to that effect."

I rubbed at my beard. "Something to that effect, yes."

She laughed bitterly and scratched her head with both hands. "How convenient. Ezekiel wants to save his own ass, and he knows *precisely* how to rope me in. Mother-*fucker.*" She dropped the now-deformed water bottle

and threw the blanket off and sat fuming, taking thick breaths through her nostrils.

"But do you even believe him, at this point? How do we know he isn't just saying—"

"Oh, no! *No,*" she cut me off. "It doesn't matter. I *need* to believe him. I can't take the chance at *not* believing him. And he fucking knows it. So here we are!" She spread her arms in mock triumph. "I ask you again, dear Maurus! What is your plan? What must we do for our *good friend* Ezekiel, the *friendly* extraterrestrial?"

"I mean, I don't…" I grabbed at my hair and twisted it around my fingers and paced the room. "I have a few half-plans, distorted plans, but nothing concrete." I looked around, remembering as always the possibility that every word we said was being recorded.

I motioned for Lorelei to follow me into the kitchen. "I still don't even know exactly what the end goal is, either," I said for effect. She got up and followed me. "Help Ezekiel? Help him how? Medically? That's your department. If anyone can save his life, I'd think it would be you." We made it to the sink. "Don't mind me," I said. Lorelei squinted at me. "Menial work helps me think. Let me do some dishes for a minute."

I turned the sink on full blast as Lorelei scanned my bare, immaculate countertop. After

a second, she got my drift, and we leaned our heads over the empty sink and whispered over the running water, barely hearing each other.

"Is there any situation where Ezekiel might be moved topside?" I asked her.

Her eyes bulged. "Topside? An EBE, *topside?* You think Black Book would ever risk that kind of exposure?"

"It must happen occasionally. How do the EBE's get down here in the first place?"

"Well, capturing one after a crash-landing is one thing. Rushing it down here under cover of darkness, where they can lock it up and interrogate it at their leisure. That's very different from bringing one *up,* into the world, on *purpose.*"

"I'm thinking something medical. Some kind of tests, some procedure, something that can only be done up there."

Lorelei grinned. "You're a funny guy. 'Up there' is an official military base. They're on an official, public budget. Which means they're cheap. This place," she rolled her eyeballs around, gesturing at The Underground as a whole. "This place is black budget. No official record, no accountability. This is where the money is. All your state-of-the-art 'tests' are down here. We have a med-bay specifically

designed for the EBEs. No expense has been spared."

I nodded. "Right. Is there any way you could sabotage it?"

Her eyebrows went up. "The med-bay?" She looked down at the water swirling in the drain. "There are several ways, I suppose," she said after a moment. "But I can't think of any that would look like an accident."

"What about something indeterminate? An incident that requires investigation to determine foul play?"

She pursed her lips. "A large enough fire, perhaps. Lots of flammable chemicals in there. But it would have to be a massive spill to wreck the entire place."

"But you could manage it? Even without the cameras seeing you?"

"No cameras." I must have looked astonished because she laughed. "I know. There's cameras over every inch of this place, except, so we're told, for our domiciles. But when you get down to M-5 it's different. The EBEs screw with electronics. Something about them. Their EM fields are different from ours. It's complicated. Point being, nothing quite works right. That's why they keep it so damn dark down there. Lights won't come on all the way. If you had tried your phone down there, it

wouldn't have worked. Digital devices especially get fucked with. So no, no cameras. No recording devices of any kind. I have to use a dinosaur cassette recorder from the nineties to record all my medical procedures, and even those get pretty spotty."

"Huh." Absently, I ran my fingers along the faucet. "Well, that's a help."

"Barely." I looked at her. The running faucet reflected in her pupils. "So I go in there and start a chemical fire and destroy a multimillion dollar medical facility? Then what? It won't take them long to realize it wasn't an accident, and it won't take them long to narrow down the list of suspects. Not a whole lot of people are allowed down there. We'd have a window of a few days—at *best*—for Ezekiel to have some medical crisis. You want to just *hope* his next respiratory attack times out that well? And even if he gives himself an attack on purpose, you want to just *hope* for a miracle where Black Book actually agrees to bring him topside for his care?!"

I stood up straight and looked toward my work bench again. Next to the crystal cube was my tiny vial of Ravana's poison. The eye-dropper. I laughed.

Of course. The second vial of poison was always meant for him. I became oddly relaxed,

gazing at it. I surrendered to futility. It was a kind of dark religious experience, realizing my life was in the hands of a higher intelligence, and had been for longer than I could possibly imagine—probably forever.

It was her. Ravana. This was all her game. She was the one who told me to get the poison. Now here we were, ready to use that second dose, just like she wanted. I laughed again, like a crazy person.

Lorelei followed my eyes, glanced at my work bench and then back at me.

"I believe," I explained, "that I have a way to make our medical crisis to order."

She stared at me, her face blank.

"To confirm," I continued, "it is likely you will see Ezekiel again in the near future, yes? Directly?"

Her lips became a thin line. "Confirmed."

"I have something for you to give him. Wait until you've sabotaged the med-bay, but then do it as soon as possible. That is…if you're sure you want to take all this risk?"

She made a helpless face and shook her head. "Again. It's not a question of 'want.' I have no choice. Your plan is my plan."

I nodded. "Okay. Once they move Ezekiel topside, text me and let me know. Make it

sound like it's news, like you're telling me something shocking. I'll take care of the rest."

"*Once* they move him." She chuckled. "I wish I shared your confidence."

"It seems neither of us have a choice," I muttered.

"What?" She said.

I turned off the water and went over to my work bench. Lorelei half-followed me, meandering back into the living area. I returned with the dropper and put it in her hand. She touched it with the tip of her finger and rolled it around on her palm.

"For your friend," I said innocuously.

She arched a questioning eyebrow.

"I, uh." I sighed. "There's something I should tell you. It would be dishonest if I didn't."

Lorelei looked back into the kitchen, as if she thought we should still be talking in the sink.

"I'm the one who poisoned Carnell." Her head snapped back. Her blue eyes made small darting movements, studying my face like it was a foreign artifact. I couldn't detect any emotions quite yet. Like Bohm, she was simply reassessing me. I wasn't who she thought I was, and she was trying to figure out what that meant.

"The stuff I used," I continued, pointing at the dropper for emphasis, "was meant to cause a temporary medical crisis. It was not supposed to kill."

She closed her fist around the dropper and brought it up to her chest, as if to protect it from me. "I…" She gulped. Her face scrunched up, like she was gagging on her own thoughts. "Why would you…*why?*" Her eyelids clamped shut.

"He was harassing you."

Her eyes blew open again. "So you just took it upon yourself to *poison* him? That was your solution? You didn't want to run it by me first? Given that, you know, I was the one with the actual problem? You didn't think my input would be helpful in solving it? No, of course not. It was more flattering for your ego to come to my *rescue.* Never mind how I feel about it or what the repercussions are, just charge in like a fucking elephant and *save* me, right?"

Her vehemence stung me. I wanted to be a mouse again and crawl into some corner until she left. But that was another thing I was determined not to do anymore. I looked away from her before I could catch myself, but I otherwise stood my ground and let her give it to me.

"I was in a bad place," I admitted. "I wasn't myself. I haven't been, ever since I started working on this saucer. The one I've been flying. It does things to me. It gives me—"

"Oh, so it's the UFO's fault! Blame it on the UFO!" Her face reddened and she raised her arm above her head. I thought she was going to throw the vial. She must have thought better of it. Slowly, she lowered her hand and put the dropper in her pocket. She turned away from me. I could tell she was tearing up again.

"I'm sorry for the way I handled it. It may indeed have been the wrong approach. You're right—this was your problem, and I made no attempt to include you in solving it. That was selfish, and you are likely correct that ego played a larger role than compassion did. That being said, I'm not sorry for doing *something.* The guy was a problem."

She didn't answer. I could see her dab at her eyes.

"In any event," I said. "I'll understand if this changes things. If you no longer wish to pursue any kind of relationship with me. I would find that regrettable, but I would get it."

She pushed her hands slowly through her hair. "I don't even know anymore," she moaned. "This is all just too much. Everything is too crazy."

“Then come with me.” I moved closer to her, but not too close. Her midnight hair had an almost purplish tinge under my lights, and it had fallen down over one of her eyes. The other watched me with cautious fire. “Let’s leave this place. Look at what it’s doing to us. Both of us, as individuals.”

“So that’s where it ends?” She asked hoarsely. “That’s the culmination of your master plan? To run away? To *live* on the run?”

“What other choice will we have?” I looked around the room, feeling that we were getting dangerously specific with our wording. I added vaguely: “When all is said and done?”

She thought for a long moment. She took a thick breath and pushed her hair out of her eye and tucked it behind her ear. “I will help you,” she finally said. “I will do what you need me to do. But after that…” She closed her eyes. A lone tear seeped out and fell straight to the floor. She shook her head. “After that, I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

She was on her way to the door before she finished talking. I hoped she would turn back and look at me, even once. Even if it was only a glance. She didn’t.

My disappointment was real, but by no means crippling. It was just a passing

sensation, like a breeze over water. And I knew that it, too, was ordained.

Children? Me? Do I ever want to "settle down" and "start a family?"
Next question. Don't you ever fucking ask me that again.

-From Session 10 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 10

"The fuck is going on out there? What did you do?"

Dolion's voice blared from my car radio. His thick breath muffled the speakers. Almost thought I could smell it.

"I haven't done shit for a week," I told him. I was driving through some quiet, pretty village. It looked like it was from the 1800s. The kind of place nothing ever happened in. Dumb, smiling faces passed on the sidewalks and went into little shops. The same shops they'd been going in for generations.

"Then how come Gray Man is flying me out to Utah? Do I need to clean up some mess you made?"

"*What?*" I hissed.

He laughed. I turned the volume down on him. "Don't sound so excited. I'm just following orders."

"Why? What is he bringing you out here for?"

"I don't *know.* That's why I'm asking you. I'm looking forward to seeing you too. Honey."

I pushed harder on the gas. A stop sign went by. I ran it. "I *told* him I didn't need your

help. That old fuck hasn't even given me a chance."

I heard him shovel food in his mouth. "Chance at what?"

"At *shit.* Nothing has even happened yet! He called this morning and told me to stand by and be ready. He sent me to some ancient shithole village and said he'll contact me when he needs me. Nothing's happened all day and I've been driving back and forth like an asshole."

"Mmmlllemmm. Maybe he just wants me for…like…backup."

"*Why?* What do I need backup for? *Nothing has fucking happened.*"

"I dunno, damn. Calm your tits. Maybe it's not even related, babe. All I know is I'm waiting to board a flight to Utah right now. I don't know anything else."

I shook my head. A cutesy store filled with fun, happy trinkets came up on the side of the road. I'd passed it about fifty times today, and every time I hated it more. I stomped on the brakes and parked on the sidewalk.

"To be fair," Dolion said in a gentle voice he liked to use when he knew he was going to say something I didn't like, "you have been kinda wigging out lately. So maybe Gray Man just wants backup."

“The fuck does that mean? ‘Wigging out?’ How the fuck am I wigging out?”

“Well, there’s our conversation last week for starters, when you started sobbing and blubbering and—“

I ended the call and turned the car off. Got out and walked into the little shop. It was called “Mama’s Memoryland.” A bell clanged in my ear when I opened the door.

It was endless. Shelves upon shelves stacked with knickknacks and hand-made nothings. They stretched to infinity. A fat lady with blond hair grinned at me from behind the counter.

“Hey there girlfriend!” She beamed. “How ‘bout all this sunshine?”

I ignored her and perused the shelves.

Her cheerfulness was a bulldozer. “Just let me know if ya see anything ya like!”

I didn’t like any of it. Not for what it was. Every item in the store looked like a cheap Christmas tree ornament. But if I had been assigned to kill this woman, the place would have been a goldmine, I admit.

I went up to the counter. She flashed me her nauseating smile, like everything in the world was beautiful.

“You made all this?” I asked.

“Everything ya see!” She chirped.

“Stop smiling.”

She didn’t stop. “Beg your pardon?”

I glared death at her. And she was still happy to see me.

“Ya know,” she said, leaning forward. “You got the most beautiful eyes. I never seen eyes that color. Like the insides of some roasted chestnuts.”

“Shut up.”

“Pardon?”

I pounded the countertop with my fists and rattled several of the knickknacks. The lady jumped back. Finally wiped her grin off. She gawked at me with big brown horse eyes for a minute, then glanced at a phone on the end of the counter. Thing was older than me.

I picked up the nearest trinket and twisted it in my fingers. It was a white flower, carved out of wood. “Does this mean something?” I asked. “Or did you just think it looked pretty?”

She didn’t move. Eyes bugged out of her head. They zipped back and forth, from me to the phone.

I raised my voice. “Well?”

“Uhh,” she twitched. “M-means somethin’.”

“What does it mean?”

“P-pardon?”

I sighed. “Do I not speak clearly? Do I not enunciate myself?”

“Pardon?”

With my free hand, I ripped the phone from its cord and smashed it on the floor. She yelled and shot out of her stool and knocked it over.

“Please, lady,” she whimpered, cramming herself up against the wall. “What’s this all about? You want me to open the register?”

“I want you to answer my questions and stop acting like a retarded cow.”

Mascara ran through the lines of blubber on her cheeks. “What sorta questions?”

“The sorta ones I ask.”

“Like *what?*”

I threw the flower knickknack at her head. It bounced off with a hollow thud. She screamed again. “You said your fucking flower means something! I asked you what it meant. What does your fucking flower symbolize?”

“New beginnings! It means new beginnings!”

“Good. Now pick it up.”

She bent slowly and swept her hands over the floor until she found it. Never took her eyes off me. When she found it she reached up to the counter and set it down.

“Thank you,” I said. “Do you have children?”

“Oh god,” she winced, like she was afraid I would ask. She stayed on the floor and hugged her knees.

“That’s not an answer,” I sang. “Looking at you, I’d bet you’re in your early forties or so. That about right?”

She closed her eyes and nodded, cried softly.

“That’s plenty old enough for children. Do you have any?”

“Listen lady, I don’t know what you—“

I grabbed another knickknack and threw it against the wall. It broke into pieces. The lady yelped and covered her face. “I told you to answer my *fucking questions.*”

“Yes! I got kids.”

“How many?”

“Threeee, three kids, pleeeeaaase—“

“All right. Good.” I took on a softer tone. “Now. Is there anything you wouldn’t do for your children?”

She shook her head. Yellow bangs wobbled over her forehead. “No ma’am. Nothin’.”

“Would you kill for them?”

“Ohhhh.” She groaned and covered her face again.

"I'm not threatening your children, you dumb bitch. I'm just asking a question."

"Please ma'am, I just don't wanna think about that kinda stuff."

I pulled out my pistol and set it on the counter. The lady screamed her head off.

"SHUT UP!" I yelled. She went on shrieking. I picked up the gun and pointed it at her. "I SAID SHUT THE FUCK UP! I'm not gonna shoot you, but if you don't shut up I will fucking shoot you."

"Please!" She managed to bring herself down to heavy breathing, rocking back and forth in a hysterical ball.

"All right." I set the pistol on the counter again and turned it so the barrel was pointed at me. "Now. 'Mama.' If I told you to pick up this gun and shoot me between the eyes, or I would find your children and do the same to them, would you do it?"

She covered her mouth and wailed into the palms of her hands. Sounded very much like a cow indeed.

My eyes started to sting. I blinked. "Hey! Stay with me. If you don't answer me I'm gonna start getting ideas."

"Wahhhh, I don't…I don't know how to… WAHHHH!"

"Touch the gun. Put your hand on it."

She got herself up on one knee and stretched her arm to the counter. Breathing was all over the place. She put her hand on the grip. It shook loudly against the counter.

"How's that feel?" I asked her.

"I…don't…like it much."

"But you could kill me. Right now. Move your finger to the trigger."

"Ma'am, I don't wanna do that."

"No? What if it's that or your children?"

She screamed. "Noooo!"

"It's a small town. I have resources. Wouldn't be hard for me to find them. I could have it done in an hour."

"But you…said you…wouldn't!" Every word was a hiccup. She'd pass out soon. But she moved her finger to the curve of the trigger.

"If you don't answer my question, I will. Now tell me."

"Tell ya *what?!*"

"If I told you, right now, that I would find your children and kill them, would you pull that trigger and kill me first?"

"Ma'aaaaam, please, it don't gotta be like that."

"SAY IT DID! FUCKING HUMOR ME OR MAYBE IT WILL!"

"YES!!"

"WHAT?"

“YES, I WOULD DO IT!” She sobbed. “I’D SHOOT YOU! OH GOD!!” She coughed and choked. Took all the energy she had to keep her hand on my gun.

My lips started up. My god damn lips again. I’d had a good week, but now they were trembling. I even leaked a tear on this nice woman’s floor.

I wiped my eye. “Good,” I told the lady. I took my gun from her and left the store.

URGENT NOTICE: *DUE TO UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES, TOPSIDE MEDICAL FACILITIES ARE NOW RESTRICTED. IF YOU FEEL THAT YOU REQUIRE MEDICAL ATTENTION, REPORT SYMPTOMS TO YOUR DEPARTMENT MANAGER. IF YOU MEET THE REQUIREMENTS FOR EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT, YOU WILL BE TRANSPORTED OFF-BASE TO THE NEAREST AVAILABLE HOSPITAL. WE APOLOGIZE FOR ANY INCONVENIENCE THIS MAY CAUSE. WE ARE WORKING TO RESTORE FUNCTIONALITY TO TOPSIDE MEDICAL FACILITIES AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. FURTHER INFORMATION WILL BE RELAYED AS SOON AS IT IS AVAILABLE. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.*

-M-Facility Administration - Message To All Employees

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 13

My phone buzzed. I was in the middle of a handshake with a suit. He was an official from the Intelligence Community. He was tall and old and looked down at me with eyes that said: “I speak with the President.” Mr. Gray had introduced me to this big wig as his darling. He didn’t use that word—he called me his “unlocker of secrets,” which I thought meant more or less the same thing.

We were topside, standing by a hangar under the stars, getting ready for Ravana’s next flight test. The event had been delayed a few days so we could bring in an outside observer for the first time. Hence the guy in the suit.

I didn’t pay much attention to him. My mind was on other things. I made a polite excuse and walked away to check my phone. A text from Lorelei read: *Did you get the notification? Medical facilities on the surface are restricted. No one is allowed in.*

That’s odd, I replied, playing up our ruse. *Weren’t you telling me yesterday that something went wrong with the EBE med-bay downstairs as well? Weird coincidence.*

Yeah, she sent back. *But nothing is "wrong" with the infirmary topside. My team is using it for something…else. Can't tell you what though.*

Hm! I wrote. *That means you're topside now too? I wonder if you'd have a moment to join me. I'm about to conduct a flight test. I'd love to have a cheerleader.*

I don't know if I'll be joining you, Maurus.

I sighed. *Clock is ticking,* I texted. Then, I sent a second message. *You'll have to make a decision in the next few minutes.*

I know…

I stood there awhile and read over our conversation, hoping she'd say more. Mr. Gray came out of nowhere and clapped me on the back. I stuffed my phone in my pocket.

"The hour is nigh, Mr. Maurus."

I looked at Ravana, sitting on the concrete so casually she could have been an airplane. Several of my techs huddled around her with tablets, trying to find some way to gather data from her. I swallowed a lump of anxiety. "Yes," I said. "I am…ready."

"Are you?"

I turned back to him. He looked at me like an x-ray machine would. An almost-smile gave the hint of his vampire fangs. I had this journal in my left hand and resisted the impulse

to pull it closer to me, away from his black eyes. “Do I sound hesitant?” I asked him.

After an infinitesimal pause, he said: “*Nervous,* is rather the word I would use.”

“Well, I…” I scratched my forearm. “Perhaps I get a little stage fright. We have a high-profile audience.”

“Mmm,” he purred, stroking his beard. “Stage fright because you’re planning to put on a show?”

My face went numb. What was that supposed to mean? It could have been a joke, but Mr. Gray didn’t make jokes. Was he on to us? Or was I simply paranoid?

“Well, what we’re doing is, of course, rather momentous.” My reply was something like that. I remember thinking I sounded steady enough.

He patted my shoulder again. This was unsettling too, since Mr. Gray is the opposite of a touchy-feely person. “Tonight *will* be momentous,” he assured me. “More so than you can imagine.” With those words he walked away and left me to my existential crisis. He *had* to know something. There was no other reason for him to be acting and speaking as he did.

And yet, he didn’t stop the test. Ten minutes later, Mr. Gray instructed everyone to back away from Ravana, and I was allowed to

enter her. Powering her up was uneventful—it was as simple for me as breathing now. Ravana levitated and shined her light on me, her bug-like buzzing permeating the air. A chorus of hushed gasps and murmurs wafted up from my audience.

Panic set in as I began to float. The only thing that gave me any composure at all was what Bohm told me: she isn't some separate entity, some external demon haunting me. Ravana is *me.* She's everything that scares me about myself. To overcome my inner demon is to overcome her. I repeated this to myself as a mantra, over and over, as light carried me inside her.

I told you you'd return to me, she gloated as her artificial ground closed up beneath me. Golden dusk bathed the forest, despite the black night outside in the "real world." The breeze was calm and steady. I went straight for the cabin.

"You were half-right," I admitted aloud. "I won't deny that our fate is *somehow* intertwined."

You begin to understand.

I reached the cabin and threw my journal on the floor. As I sat down in the high-backed chair, my body slipped into the warm fuzz of trance. I closed my eyes, and when I opened

them again, I saw the world through Ravana's "eyes."

We looked down at dozens of fascinated faces. Even the suit looked impressed. It was hard to be sure from twenty feet in the air, but I thought Mr. Gray was smiling in full.

No going back, Ravana whispered. *Your plan is under way.*

I know, I replied in thought.

Then why aren't you doing anything?

I just…need a moment.

For what? She sneered. *To "process?" To "think it over?"*

Yes!

How amusing. I thought you wanted to stop analyzing life and start living it.

Shut up. Everything changes after this. Nothing will ever be the same.

Indeed. But that is not what scares you.

I laughed. *No? Then what is?*

The girl, of course. You're afraid you'll embark on this grand adventure only to find that she has rejected you.

Fuck you.

She snickered. *Then she'll stay, and you'll have to leave, and you'll never see her again.*

Fine! You're right, as usual. Now shut up and let me think.

There is nothing to think about. You don't need her. I am here for you now.

Oh, joy. I feel safer already.

Easy to be sarcastic now. You have yet to see what I can do. The fantasies I can make real for you. I can provide every pleasure you crave from that girl. I can grant every secret wish.

All right, enough.

You need only imagine it, little one.

I said shut up!

Anything you imagine, I will make real, here in this fertile realm.

I screamed and we surged forward. We rose five hundred feet in a millisecond. Then, I flew us across the base to the infirmary. We hovered over the building for a moment. A soldier on patrol craned his neck to look at us.

I was stuck. My plan was already falling apart. I didn't know which room Ezekiel was in. From up here, the building was just a blob of gray and concrete and hard edges and windows.

Ravana read my thoughts. *You don't need to "know" which room,* she said.

I caught her meaning instantly. Ravana was powered by my psychic energy. Wherever I "thought" to go, that is where we would go. I didn't need to "pilot" her. So, I thought of Lorelei—then, catching myself, I thought of Ezekiel.

Since they were probably in the same room, this mental hiccup didn't hurt. We appeared instantly by a window on the east side of the building. It had been left open for us. I could barely make out the form of a small figure lying on the bed.

Do not hesitate, Ravana chided. *Already the base is on alert.*

Why aren't there any guards in the room? I wondered. *They just left Ezekiel in there alone? Unattended?*

Perhaps they are in the hallway guarding the door. Abduction by flying saucer is not a likely contingency. It is entirely conceivable that they neglected to plan for it. But you must hurry!

As if alerted by Ravana's urgency, the soldier we saw fired at us, having run around to this side of the building. I could feel bullets glance off Ravana's hull, though it wasn't painful and didn't seem to damage her.

Shit! I turned Ravana on her side. With a simple thought, I activated her tractor beam. It lit up the infirmary like sunlight and centered on the figure in the bed. In the new lighting, I could see Lorelei sitting in the far corner of the room. She raised her arm and shielded her eyes.

Slowly, Ezekiel floated up from the bed. I didn't get a good look at him. He was just a

silhouette to me, but what little I could glimpse seemed almost to be in the shape of a goblin.

When he was about halfway to the window, two guards burst through the door, guns raised. They stopped at the foot of the bed and stared, mouths drooping. Gunfire roared intermittently behind us. A few stray bullets caught in the tractor beam. They froze in the light and drifted there, harmless as toys, rising up with Ezekiel into Ravana.

We have him, Ravana declared. *He is inside.*

Right, I said.

Why do we wait?

Lorelei!

She was still sitting in her chair, tense from the sound of gunfire, but otherwise motionless. Ravana's light beam went off and darkness filled the room again. A few late arriving bullets puttered musically to the concrete.

Turn it back on, I ordered.

She isn't coming, Maurus, Ravana said.

Do it!

Maurus! Look at her. She doesn't want to come.

The guards recovered from their astonishment and started shooting their pistols.

Lorelei jumped out of her chair and crouched in the corner and covered her ears.

You don't know what she wants, I said. *She can't get past the guards.*

Would you like to risk them shooting her? We must leave. Now.

She was right. If we waited any longer, things would get worse. I swore and took us up. We rose a thousand feet over the base and watched it come to life. Tanks rumbled, trucks and buggies darted around like swarming ants. Angry voices drifted up from everywhere.

Maurus… Ravana warned.

What have I done?

We're still too close. We must be far away.

I've lost everything, I whined.

Not everything. Just her. That's what upsets you. You were prepared to abandon the rest.

No! My work. My career…

You knew all that was over the moment you met me. I have made your work obsolete.

FUCK YOU!

Something thundered below us. Exploding shells from tanks encircled us. From the runway at the edge of the base, fighter jets scrambled.

We must leave, Ravana urged. *They are coming for us. There is a limit to the damage we can sustain.*

Maybe I should let them, I spat. *It would finally be the end of you.*

You think I am bound to this body alone? You can never escape me. Leave this place, right now, or it will be the end of both of us. Is that what you want?

Maybe it should be.

It isn't, and we both know it. Don't use self-pity to spite me. Lorelei would find it unattractive.

The jets had taken off now. Three of them circled back toward us, flying in formation.

She's not coming, Maurus, Ravana said. *Let her go. You float here out of final, desperate hope of flying into the sunset with sweet Lorelei. But it is not to be.*

Just shut up with the know-it-all bullshit. You may know what I want, but you don't know what she *wants.*

The fighter jets locked on and fired their missiles. Death came at us with a streak of smoke and fire.

MOVE, MAURUS! TIME IS UP!

I thought of the mountains, miles away, and in an instant we were there, floating silently between the peaks. Rockets from the fighters

sailed through the place we had been. They would leave craters somewhere in the dry wilderness outside the base.

Outside the cabin, I found Ezekiel sitting on a log by the stream. Now he was tall and human-looking, dressed in a blue, skintight suit that covered him from the neck down, like a diver's suit. Blond hair flowed down below his shoulders. From a distance he seemed mirage-like, a cloud of blue-yellow mist taking the shape of a man below Ravana's artificial sunset. As I got closer, he appeared more or less normal, apart from the awkward suit and, perhaps, the physical perfection of his body. He was sculpted like a Roman statue, only thin and lithe, muscles not bulging, but toned in natural proportion to his body type. I had been ready to tear him a new orifice, but he smiled at me in a way that dispelled rage, gazed at me with blue eyes that felt angelic rather than alien. No human was this handsome.

How convenient. I refused to let him charm me out of anger. "Why don't you just find a body you like and stick with it?" I snapped at him. "Try some consistency. If you look like someone else every hour, people get confused."

I winced, feeling his mind enter mine like a needle. <Do you wear the same clothes every

day?> His telepathic voice was as I remembered—elfin and song-like, even playful. His mouth didn't move when he "spoke," which was strange enough when he looked like a stereotypical alien. Now, wearing the mask of an earthling, it was downright creepy.

"That isn't even kind of the same thing."

<Oh,> he said with disarming innocence.

I shook myself, clinging to the righteous indignation that all his psychic judo and questions-as-answers were very successfully shaking off me. "Listen, god damn it! Do you understand what just happened? You have a hell of a lot to answer for."

<So ask.>

He folded his hands and waited. No argument, no defensive posturing. I couldn't be mad at him and it was infuriating. I stared at him, at a loss.

He pointed to a flat gray rock across from his log. <Perhaps you'd like to sit.>

I summoned a puff of anger. "No! I would not like to sit." I jabbed my finger at him. "*You* would like me to sit. Maybe we should start with that. How long have you been manipulating me? Have I ever made a decision that was actually *mine?* Or have you been in my brain my entire life, steering me to Ravana, to this fucking UFO? I brought you here to help me control her,

but you've been working with her all along haven't you?"

<These are meaningless questions,> he said simply. His golden hair wavered in the breeze.

"You don't get to say that," I yelled. "They're meaningful to *me.*"

<Just breathe a moment, Maurus. Anger blinds you. Allow yourself to feel what is.>

I hated to admit it, but he was right. You can't misunderstand someone telepathically. Not unless you want to. I wanted to be angry with him because rage was more comfortable than the truth. And the whole truth was right there, flowing like a stream beneath his "words." But it was impossible to understand. I don't think humans are meant to understand it. Truth is infinite. Our brains are small.

<You don't need to "understand" what is,> Ezekiel said, responding to my train of thought. <What is simply is. All you have to do is not get in the way.>

I massaged my temples, feeling suddenly that I did want to sit down. I refused to do that. Instead, I found the nearest tree and leaned against it. The bark felt every bit as textured and *real* as an actual tree. It *smelled* real.

"Jesus Christ. Look, it'll help me to talk this out. All right? I get what you're saying. I see

everything you want to tell me, right here, now. I'm here in your mind. But just level with me for a minute. Humans understand each other by talking. Be human with me for a bit. Explain yourself."

Ezekiel laughed. Oddly enough it came out as real sound. <Fine. I wasn't invalidating your questions by calling them meaningless. I meant that they are based in misunderstandings. Thus, they don't make sense. You accused me of manipulating you, which implies that I am some external agent. You insinuated that Ravana is some outside force that is conspiring against you, but that contradicts the very mantra you were chanting on the way in here.>

I sighed. "That Ravana is a part of me?"

<She *is* you. There are no "parts." You are not a car.> He smiled. His face was ageless. There wasn't a single blemish on his skin.

I threw my hands in the air. "But that doesn't make any *sense.* Ravana is a physical thing. She exists in the world, you can touch her."

<So what?>

I laughed helplessly. "So how can she be *me* if she is an actual tangible thing outside of me?"

He leaned forward with interest and rested his chin on his palm. <What do you mean by that word, “me?”>

I started to answer. It seemed like a straightforward question. What could be simpler? Why even ask? But all the responses that came to my tongue were feeble. Inadequate. They felt like lifeless cliches. How could I sum up the concept of “I?”

“Well,” I finally said. “I guess that’s…sort of a philosophical question.”

<So philosophize,> Ezekiel said. <We have no schedule here.> He gestured at Ravana’s time-bending wonderland.

“I mean…” I huffed. “It shouldn’t be philosophical. It should be the most obvious thing. I’m *this.*” I waved my arms and indicated my general person. “I’m the conscious organism that you call Maurus.”

He inclined his head. <Not a bad answer. But a limited one. You think you are only what you call an organism? A singular biological entity?>

I shrugged. <What else could I be?>

His eyes glinted. I realized I hadn’t seen him blink yet. <From your point of view, your answer is sensible. Your science tells you that biological organisms are made of discrete units. Cells. Cells, in turn, are made of molecules and

atoms—what you call “matter.” So what you’re telling me is, essentially, you are an isolated blob of matter. You move through a world made of other matter-blobs that are totally distinct entities from what you call yourself.>

“Sure,” I said. “In a nutshell, fine. That would be my prevailing worldview.”

<But haven’t you been struggling to reconcile that worldview with recent events?>

Verbally, I didn’t respond. But I thought of all the deadly “coincidences” that had happened in the past month. My terror and dread came flooding back, along with images of Edwin and his eyes dissolving in acid. These thoughts and feelings were as good as words to a telepathic being, so Ezekiel had my answer.

<Right,> he said. <If reality is nothing more than matter-blobs knocking together, why should your imagination be able to influence the external world? What *is* imagination, if everything is made of atoms? How can atoms imagine anything? So your worldview is incomplete. So too, then, is your concept of self.>

I plucked a blade of grass and twisted it in my thumb and forefinger. “So you’re suggesting that human science has things backwards. You’re saying the world isn’t made

up of atoms that think and imagine things. It's made of things that think and imagine atoms."

<Almost,> he said, hands folded in his lap. I noticed he barely ever gestured when he spoke. <Cut out the word "things," in your last sentence, and you'll have it.>

I shook my head. Ezekiel waited for me to summarize. I tossed the blade of grass in the stream and watched it float away. When we weren't talking, there was no sound but the water. It could have been peaceful.

<Say it,> Ezekiel said. <You wanted it in words. You have it. Say the words.>

"The world is imagination," I grumbled.

<There.> He smiled.

"And when I ask whose imagination it is, you're going to say it's mine, right?"

<You read my mind.>

"But that's preposterous!" I shot up from the rock. "So what, I'm the main character of the universe? How narcissistic do you want me to be?"

<It's only preposterous because you're still thinking of yourself as a matter-blob. Drop that limitation, and the truth will be known. It's right here in front of you.>

"So no one else is real?" I sassed. "I'm the only real person? *Really?*"

<I didn't say that. Other people are real.>

“You just said they’re imaginary!”

<No. *You* said the *world* is imaginary. That doesn’t mean it isn’t real. Other people exist. They are aspects of you, and you are an aspect of them.>

“Ugh, then why all this bullshit about me facing my fears and saving the universe? Why are my emotional issues more important than anyone else’s?”

<They’re not. Everyone is a universe. And everyone has a dragon to face. When people have similar dragons, their worlds blend together. Everyone you meet is therefore a part of you, and you a part of them. When you slay your dragons, you beautify the collective imagination. To redeem yourself is to redeem reality.>

I sighed and sat down on the rock again. “And Ravana is my dragon. She’s the evil part of me I have to confront.”

<Yes. You know it, and you’ve always known it, but you don’t want to know it. So you try to ignore it. Thus the dragon grows and gets nasty. Your ignoring it is what makes it “evil.” And through evil, reality becomes ill.>

Crows cawed somewhere in the forest. I looked away and saw dozens of them circling the trees. Sunset peaked with pink sky and fiery clouds.

“What part of me is she, then? Why do all you extraterrestrial folks say she’s my mother?”

Finally he moved a little bit. He adjusted his weight on the log. The bark made tiny creaking sounds. There was something cat-like about Ezekiel, I thought. At least in this blond form. He had that feline grace about him, that totally non-anxious way of exerting himself only when he felt like it.

<How do you feel about your mother?>

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know, doctor. I haven’t thought about her in years.”

<Indeed. How many years of ignoring do you think it takes to grow a nasty dragon?>

I sat there and simmered. The fact that his comment made me angry was only more evidence that it was true.

Again Ezekiel responded as if I’d said something, verbal silence being inequivalent with psychic silence. <Ravana is a manifestation of your neglected feelings about your mother. You have to confront them at some point. There is no escape in eternity.>

By that point, I’d have enough of his lecturing, and of the conversation in general. It had gotten away from me. I tried to steer it to a close.

“And which part of me are you?” I asked Ezekiel.

He smiled, showing flawless teeth. <I'm the part that sees what you could be.>

I blinked. An idea came in the psychic undercurrent of his words. It was fuzzy and hard to understand, like everything he'd said in this conversation. "You live outside of time, don't you?" I asked.

He fell into a coughing fit, which was extremely bizarre to watch. He still didn't blink, and no expression appeared on his face, not even a reddening of the skin. But he was doubled over, arms wrapped around his abdomen, hacking and wheezing like his lungs were about to collapse. These sounds also reminded me of cats. They were high-pitched and hiss-like.

"Shit," I said. "The poison. Lorelei gave you the poison, right? Are you going to make it?"

He recovered from his coughing instantly and sat up. <I'll be around long enough.>

"Well what the hell does that mean, for someone who exists outside of time?!"

<I think we've pushed the limits of human understanding enough for one day,> he said with the psychic equivalent of a hand-wave. <You have work to do, Maurus, and I can see you remain intent on ignoring it.>

I rose from my rock again, without even thinking. “No, *we* have work to do. I still don’t know how much I can trust you, or anything you’ve said. The only thing we agree on is that we need to get Ravana under control. That’s why I brought you here.”

<You will go and sit for a while,> he said, standing up. It wasn’t a *command,* per se, but a simple statement of fact. <You will sit alone and see what your psyche tells you. You will be tempted to talk yourself out of your task. You will try to convince yourself that I am a liar. I hope you will see through these temptations and hear the truth from yourself. For the sake of us all.>

Immediately, I found myself back in the cabin.

Found myself. Those are the key words. I can’t remember walking here. Which leads me to believe that either Ravana or Ezekiel or both hypnotized me.

Ezekiel claims not to manipulate me, yet here I am, in a place I didn’t choose to be, doing exactly what he wanted me to do, which is to ponder everything.

I walked into the bare wooden “living room” and a desk and chair materialized in front of me. All I did was think to myself that I wished I had a good surface to write on. And then it

appeared, all at once, made of fine, polished oak, just as I would want, in precisely the right corner of the room. I didn't have to adjust it. I sat down to write all this and it was immediately comfortable.

Maybe there is some truth to what Ravana says. Whatever I need, she provides. All I have to do is "imagine."

It's pretty convenient. Even tempting. I could start to see a life here. I'd be left alone to my work. I could dream up a lab and create miracle machines beyond anything possible in the "real world." It would be a life without limits. I would be my own god.

I could even have Lorelei.

But it wouldn't *be* Lorelei. And I don't think I'm comfortable with that. What are the ethics of such a thing? Is it immoral to conjure your own pet version of someone without the consent of the original person? To have this puppet act according to your will, rather than their own?

Maybe I'm just thinking too hard. But it seems unhealthy. Obsessive. Stalker-ish.

No. No, of course, if I'm going to have Lorelei, it has to be the real Lorelei. And it must be her choice as much as mine. And despite what Ravana says, Lorelei never gave me a final answer.

Ravana. There's a catch if there ever was one. Not so bad to live here, eh? Tempting to spend eternity in my own personal fantasy world, is it? Let's not forget, I'd be living here with *her.* What would it be like to have an untamed dragon for a roommate? Heaven would be set ablaze.

Notice Ezekiel didn't say much about that. What happens to Ravana if I resolve all my "neglected feelings?" Does she suddenly become a happy dragon? Hah. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

No. The whole point is that Ravana wants me. She has *claimed* me. I brought Ezekiel here because I thought he would be immune to her seduction. Now I find they're in cahoots. Go figure.

There's only one way out that I can see. If I'm dealing with aliens that seek to control my will, then the only way I can be free is to do what they *least* want me to do. I have to exert *my* will over theirs.

I have to go back for Lorelei.

What kind of future do *I want?*
Never thought about it. Never wanted to. I don't have a paradise. I don't have a dream. I don't build things. I burn them.
-From Session 11 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 082 - Codename: Arae
Excerpt from personal journal - 11

I don't know what I am anymore. Holy fucking shit. I need to write this down or I'll go fucking crazy.

Mr. Gray called around midnight and said the time had come. His words. "The time has come, dear Arae." Figured he was being weird and cryptic, because, you know. It's Mr. Gray. But after what just happened, I think he hit it. My time has come.

Gray sent me a phone number and told me to trace it and eliminate everyone I found there. "Every living thing in that location must be extinguished," he said.

So I called up the techies and they tracked the phone. My mark was located just outside of an Air Force base in the middle of nowhere. That bumfuck village I was trapped in all day was the nearest town to the place.

Could only drive about a mile outside the village before I had to ditch the car and hike. Mr. Gray ordered me to stay off the roads. Ended up sneaking around the perimeter of the base. Place was like a god damn beehive. Soldiers ran in loops. Sounded like angry ducks, quacking and yelling at each other and running

back and forth with no logic or order. Helicopters and jets screamed overhead.

There was no moon, but the base was lit up like fucking Christmas. I kept thinking what a stupid place to hide this was. Assuming my mark was trying to hide. Couldn't imagine what else he'd be doing. According to my tracker, he wasn't moving. Was he pinned? If he was, why didn't Mr. Gray let the forces from the base deal with him? They should have found him easily.

I couldn't ask. I was on thin ice with Gray Man as it was. So I walked. Seemed like miles of dried hills and scattered rocks. Once in a while I saw a bramble.

Found him around 2 AM. The hills in the area formed a small "bowl," maybe fifty-ish feet in diameter. He was sitting on a rock at the bottom of the slope, staring at his phone.

Don't know how nobody else found him. Why weren't there any dogs? Did the hills block infrared somehow? None of it made sense. I kept coming back to the conclusion that *I* was supposed to find him. It had to be me. Never thought I'd use this word, but it was my destiny.

I pulled my gun and went down the slope, into the earthen bowl. He didn't notice me. When I got within ten feet of him, I gasped.

It was *him.* Alice's son! The ghostly light from his phone magnified his sharp, intense

features, his messy hair and overgrown beard. I searched his eyes for that crystal gray coloring I'd seen on his mother and in his pictures, but at that distance, with shit lighting, it was hard to make them out.

He heard my gasp and jumped up from the rock. He held his phone at his side and watched me approach the way a rabbit would, still and silent. Really was a frail little dude, small-boned and barely taller than me. But like his mother, he showed no fear. At least not like most people would, in front of a gun-toting assassin. Like Alice, it felt like he was figuring me out. I couldn't see those crystal eyes in the dark, but I could feel them scanning me, not looking at the barrel of the gun, but underneath it, to the context of it—what it meant for *me,* why I was holding it, why *I* was the one to bring it to him, here, now.

We stood like that for at least two minutes, neither of us moving or saying anything. The light from his phone went out and left us with starlight. Most of the lights from the base were blocked by the hills. In between flyovers from the jets, it got quiet enough to hear crickets singing.

For some reason, that's when he got scared. He made a sound like he'd been

choked and fell back onto his rock and hugged himself.

"You're the runner?" I asked.

"You," he gasped. "*You?* You're *real?*" The pitch of his voice was right in the middle, not high, not low. It was soft and delicate—nothing like his mom's—but it was rich in a way too. Could have been a good singer, maybe. "How…how are you here?" He looked frantically to the other side of the bowl, like someone else was going to jump out from there. "Are you really here?"

I followed his eyes, but I didn't see anything. There was nothing over there. "What?" I said.

He looked at me again. The whites of his eyes bugged out. "Tell me something," he said. "Say something, anything! Tell me something I don't know. That I *couldn't* know."

"*What?*" I said again. The fuck was wrong with this guy?

"Tell me something I could never know," he yelled. "So I know you're real!"

People spout some weird shit when they know you're about to kill them. I'm used to a lot of incoherent babbling. But I had never heard anything like this. A gun in your face is as real as anything gets. Why was he questioning that?

"I don't know what you don't know," I said. "But there's some things *I* want to know, and I'm the one with the gun."

"You want to ask *me* questions?" He squawked.

"You're him, right? Alice's son?"

He was completely motionless. He didn't blink.

I cocked the pistol. "Answer the question. You're him, aren't you?"

He sat up straight. There was a moment of recognition, I could see. Looked like every ounce of emotion was sucked out of him. "You killed her," he said, his tone flat.

I pursed my lips. "Look at your big brain."

"Why did you do it?" He asked in the same toneless way.

"My boss told me to."

"Yes, but why?"

"Why isn't my department. Probably the same reason I'm going to kill you."

"No, it is *not* the same reason." He was stern now. Forceful, even. For the first time, he *acted* like Alice. He put the tips of his thumb and pointer finger together and thrust them at me to emphasize his points. Very professor-ish. "She could not have been involved in the mess I am in," he said. "There is no correlation here. My mother was a mid-level employee at a

biotechnology firm. She simply could not have had access to information that would attract the likes of you."

My eyes had mostly adjusted to the gloom, so I could see the pain growing on his face as he talked about her. Somewhere in him was the fuel that set off Alice's fire. I wanted to find it. Badly.

"Why did her death upset you so much?" I asked.

He scoffed. "*Why?*"

"Yes. Why. Tell me specifically. Or I'll shoot you right now."

He glanced down at his blank phone and turned it in his hand and looked up at me again. "You're going to shoot me anyway."

I raised an eyebrow. "Maybe not. I'm flexible. Maybe if you tell me what I want, I'll tell my boss there was nobody here. Maybe I found nothing but your phone. You left it on the rock for me to trace."

He sighed and ran a hand through the mop on his head. "Poetry," he muttered.

I chuckled. "Poetry?"

He shook his head and gazed off at nothing. "The symphony of fate," he said. "It is so sophisticated, so elegant. I have no better word for it. It is poetry."

I lowered my gun. “What the fuck are you rambling about now?”

“This could happen no other way!” He hissed. “What assassin would ever care about my mother and how I feel about her? The universe sends me the only one that could ever exist. The one I *made* exist. And that’s how my life will end. It ends by confronting my mother. Just like they always wanted.” He laughed bitterly, like Alice had.

“They?” I asked, trying to gauge just how bonkers this guy was.

“They,” he growled, then continued to mumble. “The keepers of the order of time. The stage crew behind the scenes of the universe. The watchers from nowhen.” He kept staring in the same direction, at the other side of the earth-bowl.

Batshit. Off the wall. This guy was fucking cracked.

“I think it’s time to answer my question,” I said.

He took a breath and looked at me. Smiled faintly. It was a look of resignation, I thought. Of shed burdens. All the words that came next seemed to take bits of emotional weight off him, little by little. “I suppose,” he said, “I’m like most children. All I ever wanted was her approval. My mother. I wanted her to

acknowledge that I was worth the price of my own existence. I wanted her to love me not merely in the instinctual, self-sacrificing way that parents do, but to love what I brought into the world. I wanted her to see the way my existence changed reality, and to love it, and to know she loved it. I never got that from her. Never once. Now that she's dead, I never will."

I was a mess of tears. Couldn't get halfway through his spiel before the dam opened. My sobs broke out as he finished talking, and he noticed. He watched me intently. Looked almost startled.

Now I had to kill him. If there'd been any choice before, I'd blown it now. But my arm was so heavy. I tried to lift my pistol but it was a fucking boulder. My arm was shaking so hard the gun rattled. Alice's son shifted on his rock and faced me directly.

"Don't look at me," I sobbed. "Turn around!"

He didn't. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "And why are *you* so upset?"

"Shut up!" I screamed. I got the gun up a little bit, a few inches. All the muscles in my arms cramped. It was agony. But slowly—*very* slowly—I raised the gun. "I said turn around!"

He smiled. He actually smiled. Couldn't tell if he had finally pulled a pair of balls out of

his ass or if he was just a lunatic. “Perhaps you *are* real,” he said. “You’re about to break your promise. If you’re going to do that, you’ll have to look me in the eye.”

Yup. He was Alice’s son. Now more than ever.

I finally had the gun where I needed it. It’d be quick. Right between his eyes. That was the best I could do for him. “What’s y-your n-n-name?” I hiccuped. It was the last thing I needed to know. I wiped tears off my face with the back of my free hand.

He grinned. “Alice didn’t tell you.”

“TELL ME YOUR FUCKING NAME!!”

A blinding light blasted out of nowhere and filled the earth-bowl. Out of reflex, I spun toward it and fired a shot. I squinted and raised my arm. Something was floating about ten feet over the ground. It made no sound except for a faint, low buzz, like a bumblebee. Took me a few seconds to see it through all the light. It was just a black disc, maybe as long as a bus. It had no other features. The light came from its underside, bluish white, brighter than any spotlight I’d ever seen. It just floated there, right where Alice’s son had been staring before. In the darkness, I hadn’t been able to see it.

Felt like I watched it forever. It’s not like I was in “awe.” I just didn’t know what the fuck to

think. I had *no* thoughts. This *thing* had wiped them all.

Eventually, a small figure floated down from it. Rode the light like a slide. It landed softly, not six feet away from me.

"What the fuck…" I stepped back, then froze. I actually could not move, at all. Something was preventing it. I wanted to scream but couldn't even. All I could do was stare at this little alien. Had to be what it was—big black eyes, oversized head, short, tiny body, no hair or anything. It stared back at me.

That's when it came into my head. The alien got *inside* my head. Jesus Christ. I still feel it. I was an ant, its mind was so much bigger. I was a bug to it.

I fell into a stream of thoughts and images that I can't possibly describe. It'd be too obvious to say they "weren't of this world." It's more than that. They were from a different *kind* of world. A form of reality I couldn't have imagined before.

My father was there. We were on a mountaintop, blizzard howling in the dark. But I felt none of the cold. Snow whipped me, but it didn't mean anything. Neither did the campfire burning in the center of the clearing, untouched by the moaning wind. All this was only imagery.

The only thing I felt were emotions about my father. He sat by the fire and looked up at me with a sad smile. My entire being was disgust. Fury. I wanted to push his face into the fire and hold it there, but I knew that here, it would make no difference.

"I won't ask you to sit with me," he said. "I won't ask you to do that."

He began to burn. Not that he was on fire—no flame touched him. But his skin blistered and popped and turned red, then charred black. Smoke billowed and melted the whirling snowflakes. He didn't react. All he did was smile at me with those mournful eyes.

"I wasn't right," he said. "I wasn't right."

He turned to ash and the wind blew him apart. What was left of him joined the blizzard and scattered over the mountain. Soon the storm would end and nothing would be left of him but a handful of dust, undetectable and insignificant in the ocean of white over the peaks.

I came out of the vision and fell onto my back. Sputtered and hyperventilated like a maniac. My gun jumped out of my hand and clattered over the dry ground. The alien raised its arms over its head, like some kind of prayer, then swayed back and collapsed.

Alice's son dove and tried to catch the alien before it hit the ground. "No, no, *no!*" He cried. "What have you done?" He screamed at me. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!"

The black disc loomed behind them. No more buzz, no more light. It sat silently at the edge of the earth-bowl, like a void carved in the fabric of the world.

I rolled over and scrambled on all fours back up the slope. Choked on every breath. When I got to the top I ran.

URGENT NOTICE: *M-FACILITY IS NOW ON* ***LOCKDOWN.*** *FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY, PLEASE REMAIN IN YOUR DOMICILE UNTIL THE LOCKDOWN HAS EXPIRED. IF YOU EXIT YOUR DOMICILE DURING LOCKDOWN, YOUR SAFETY CANNOT BE GUARANTEED.*
THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.
-M-Facility Administration - Message To All Employees

Private Disciplinary Hearing - Transcript
Subject Codename: Lorelei
Interviewer: Director Menzel Gray
Date: June 16, 2025, 12:03 AM

Gray: Now then, Miss Lorelei, I'd like to remind you that lying will only make things worse for you.

Lorelei: Yes.

Gray: It will not do at all. All communications between Mr. Maurus and yourself have been archived. Should you attempt to deceive me, I will know it.

Lorelei: I understand that, Mr. Gray.

Gray: Very well. Perhaps you'll begin by explaining how he got you involved in this brazen scheme.

Lorelei: You're barking up the wrong tree already.

Gray: How so?

Lorelei: It wasn't Maurus who "got me involved."

Gray: It was his plan, was it not?

Lorelei: It may look that way on the surface. But I'm not so sure that it was.

Gray: You would do well to elaborate, Miss Lorelei.

Lorelei: Do you really not understand, or do you just enjoy poking me? It was your pet. Ezekiel. Or maybe you're *his* pet.

Gray: Careful now.

Lorelei: Well, it was him. This was all his doing. He extorted us. All of us. Worked us like puppets.

Gray: When you say "extorted," you mean…?

Lorelei: I mean what it means. He blackmailed me. You noticed when I had my little outburst during his checkup.

Gray: Indeed.

Lorelei: That was when. He threatened my family. He said he'd make them sick if I didn't carry out Maurus' plan. They'd die slowly.

Gray: And what did he threaten Mr. Maurus with?

Lorelei: That I don't know for sure. Maurus never said much. He wasn't a talker. I'm sure you've realized this about him.

Gray: Quite.

Lorelei: Another important thing to know about Maurus is that he isn't a risk-taker. He doesn't do "brazen" things. I know how thorough the psych-screenings are in this organization, so you must understand this too.

Gray: Mmm.

Lorelei: Then doesn't it seem a bit out of character for him to just up and do something like this? The greatest heist in the history of humankind? **[pause]** It's because he was forced to do it. He didn't want to. Ezekiel is smarter than you, me, and Maurus put together. He

understands us better than we understand him. He manipulated us. This was *his* plan. If you want a scapegoat, look at him. Don't blame Maurus. He may have committed the act, but it wasn't *his* act.

Gray: You present some compelling arguments. But you hit upon one very important point, and that is the point I would like to stress. Look at your own words. You called this "the greatest heist in the history of humankind." That is quite right. You understand the gravity of what has been set loose tonight. Knowing that, you must also know that I must handle the situation with some seriousness. Manipulated or not, Mr. Maurus is at the center of it. How lenient do you expect that I can be with him?

Lorelei: But the public still doesn't know anything about this. They certainly don't know who Maurus is. We can keep this under the rug. You don't need to eliminate him.

Gray: Eliminate?

Lorelei: [scoffs] I know how this organization operates, Mr. Gray. I know what you plan to do if you catch him. Right now you're trying to figure out whether to eliminate me.

Gray: [pause] And if I were to “eliminate” Mr. Maurus, how would that make you feel?

Lorelei: Assuming I were around to feel anything? That is not a simple question.

Gray: Surely not. But I’d like you to answer it.

Lorelei: Well…furious, I suppose. What little faith I have left in this organization—and believe me, that’s not much—would be blown to hell.

Gray: All that is superficial. That is not what I am asking. How do you feel about Mr. Maurus personally? And how might his fate affect those feelings?

Lorelei: [stammering] This is…it’s…this is irrelevant. It’s not germane to our problem.

Gray: As you just pointed out, I have an important decision to make, regarding you. The information I am requesting will help me to determine a course of action.

Lorelei: [long pause, over a minute] How? I mean, what does that have to do with—

Gray: That is not your concern. Your concern is to answer my question.

Lorelei: But I don't…I don't know…

Gray: Your feelings for him are complicated?

Lorelei: Yes.

Gray: But you don't want him to get hurt.

Lorelei: I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt or killed because of me. And I have contributed to Maurus' being where he is.

Gray: Yes, but we're getting superficial again. Focus on your feelings, Miss Lorelei. Your feelings for Mr. Maurus. These are of the utmost importance at this time.

Lorelei: That just doesn't make sense to me. At all.

Gray: You do not know everything about this world. Now, focus. Tell me.

Lorelei: [chuckles] Jesus…

[silence for two minutes, thirty-one seconds]

Lorelei: I cared about him, if you really need to know. I have been very alone for a long time, here in this place. Even with other people around, it's lonely to do what I do here. But I didn't feel alone with him.

Gray: Would you say you loved him?

Lorelei: [laughing] My god! You are… **[huffs]** We didn't…Maurus and I didn't get to a point where that would even be a valid question. We never entered that arena. There is no answer.

Gray: But if circumstances had made it possible, do you think you could have loved him?

Lorelei: I don't know! We had a kind of falling out, right before he left. I was angry about something he did. I don't know if I would have stayed angry. It was a nuanced situation, in hindsight. He wasn't exactly right, but there are bigger ways to be wrong. I don't know. I really don't know what you want me to say.

Gray: Was it that anger that made you decide not to leave with him? To escape?

Lorelei: [sighs] It may have played a small role. But I don't think it was the decisive factor, no.

Gray: Then what was?

Lorelei: I couldn't take the risk. If I had done that, you might have gone after my…people I care about. On the other hand, if I'd done nothing, those people would be in the same danger. At least, if Ezekiel is to be believed. The closest approximation of safety, for myself and my loved ones, was to do precisely what I did. That's why I did it. I was not motivated by any special feelings for Maurus, if that's what you're trying to figure out.

[silence for ninety seconds]

Gray: Very well, Miss Lorelei. You may return to your domicile until I call upon you again.

Lorelei: But…**[pause]** are you going to…?

Gray: You needn't fear for your physical safety. Consider yourself under probation.

Lorelei: But what about…Mr. Gray, can I please make a call? Just one call. You can listen to it. I don't care. I'm sure you're already tracking this person's phone. I won't try anything. I just need to know they're all right. Please.

Gray: Absolutely not.

Lorelei: Mr. Gray, please.

Gray: My decision is final. You are dismissed.

Lorelei: [crying] Please! *Please,* I need to know —

Gray: *If* you are so concerned for the safety of your sister, perhaps you should see to it that your probation goes smoothly.

[silence for seven seconds]

Gray: You are dismissed.

Lorelei: How do I know she's even alive at all?

Gray: You don't.

Nothing is more creative than death. I was reborn when my family died. The world evolved. I was a worm when they were alive. Not even that. I was an insect. A fucking bug. But I grew my wings through fire. Through my work, I give the world the same gift.

-From Session 12 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Arae

<u>Audio Tap - Hotel Room</u>
<u>Subject Codename: Arae</u>
<u>Date: June 16, 2025</u>

3:33 AM: [door opens, slams]
[subject breathes heavily, paces floor]
3:37 AM: [subject jumps onto bed. muffled screams. {pillow?}]
3:38 - 3:51 AM: [subject sobs]
3:52 AM: [phone vibrates on table/ countertop]

Arae: Mom? I know it's late but I needed to… um, I don't know if I'd say *emergency* but…I know, I tried calling you a few times when I was in the car. I figured you were asleep, so I kept… no, I wouldn't say emergency. I just really needed to…you don't have to be worried, don't worry. I'm okay. Mom! I promise, I'm okay. I just needed to talk to you. I just saw something and it made me…

[subject begins to cry again]

Arae: [crying] No! I'm okay, I just…I wanna come home. Mom, I wanna come home…I know I can, but there's things you don't know about me and if you did…not this…it *does*

matter what I've done, Mom, it matters. You can't imagine…You have no idea…**[hysterical]** The things I've done! The things I've donnnnne…I can't, I can't just tell you, it would…you couldn't…I just need to come home for a while…I know it's no problem but I need you to not ask questions…please, I…I know. **[sniffling]** I know. There is one thing I have to tell you, one thing at least. I should have told you a long time ago, but…no, not over the phone. Just let me get home first. I'll need time to…thank you…thank you, I'll…Dolion? Mom, I need to go, my husband is here. I'll call you back. Yes, I'm…no, I'm gonna drive up. I'll call you when I leave. Probably a few hours…yes, I promise. I'll be all right, my husband is in the room and I need to…Mom, it's okay. I'll see you soon. I'm hanging up now.

Dolion: Don't get up.

Arae: How did you know what room I was in? When did you land?

Dolion: Don't! Get back on the bed.

Arae: Babe, I don't wanna see a gun right now. Put it away. I'm gonna be sick.

[subject falls back onto bed]

Arae: I said put it away. Stop pointing it at me. I'm not in the mood, it's not funny. I'm fucked up right now. I just got back from this…what's wrong…Dolion? Are those *tears? You?* Why? Baby, come here! What's—

[gunshot, suppressed]

4:01 AM: [two additional gunshots, suppressed]

<u>SUBJECT TERMINATED</u>

Do I believe in destiny? Do I feel like my life is "guided?"
I don't know. Who would guide it? Who would write that destiny? That seems like the bigger question.

-From Session 13 of Psychological Self-Assessment - Employee Codename: Maurus

DAS-5 Archives
Personnel File No. 111 - Codename: Maurus
Excerpt from personal journal - 14

This will end in sorrow.

That's what Ravana said as I guided her down into a little nook in the crags around the base. We were enclosed by slopes on all sides.

You can shield us from infrared, correct? I asked her. *Make us invisible?*

There are other ways to be seen, she replied.

That's a concern for me. Not you.

My concern is *your concern.*

So you say. But you know what? I don't think you'll let anything happen to me. I know what you're capable of, and you want me all to yourself. Isn't that right?

Your physical safety is not the only question here. We should not be doing this.

I got up from my chair and left the cabin and tucked my journal under my arm. Ezekiel floated slowly my way across the clearing, like a ghost.

You say that, I told Ravana, *only because I'm doing what I want and not what you want.*

Surprisingly, she had nothing to say to that. I guessed she was passing the talking stick

to Ezekiel, so to speak, and he wasted no time in making his point.

<Maurus,> he said, still in the guise of a blond male supermodel. <This is not advisable.>

I glanced at him. A false morning sun sparkled in his blue eyes. “Stay here,” I said. “Ravana will keep me safe. I just have one thing left to do.”

<Who will keep her safe? If they see her they will destroy her, and me with her.>

“They won’t see her,” I snapped as our paths crossed. “And I don’t need to tell you that, because you already know it! You know everything that’s about to happen.”

<I know everything that *could* happen. History is written in the moment. There are no constructive outcomes for this course of action.>

I had passed him by then. I spun around to face him. “Yeah? Constructive for whom?”

He said nothing. He just looked at me, shrouded in that weird haze that seemed to follow him. In certain lighting, it made him look like a hologram.

“That’s what I thought. Stay here. When I come back, you’re going to help me put Ravana in her place.”

<What makes you think I can do that?> He asked, drifting another step in my direction.

I laughed. “You *built* her.”

<I did not.> The forest teemed with the cawing of crows.

“Well, your people did! You know the ins and outs. I didn’t build my cell phone, but I could show you how to use it, right?”

<It is not we who “built” her. She grew. She is a psychic construct. She would not be if it weren’t for you.>

“Oh, okay,” I said. “Right, I forgot. The world is imaginary. Let me rephrase then. When I get back, you’re going to help me *imagine* Ravana into submission. All right? And don’t tell me you can’t. I’ve seen what you can do to the imagination.”

He took another step and I saw the crows. Hundreds swirled in unison over the treetops like a cloud of black smoke. <It is your emotional neglect that has created this mess,> Ezekiel said. <It is your imagination that is sick. You have to be the one to fix it.>

“Emotional neglect? What? Why are we back to therapy again? When the hell did we start talking about emotions?”

He tilted his head. The wind fluffed his yellow mane. <What do you think guides the imagination? What else directs its flow?>

I rubbed my face. “Okay. Well, I’m not doing this right now. I’m going. You won’t talk me out of it. Stay here until I return.”

I walked to the center of the clearing, to Ravana’s hidden womb. Ezekiel called after me. <I cannot face your demon for you, Maurus. I cannot slay your dragon. You must do it yourself. If you try to avoid it, it will be a disaster.>

“Yeah? Like an apocalypse?” I thought back to the end-of-world vision Ravana had used to manipulate me and laughed bitterly that I had been gullible enough to believe it. “It’ll be *armageddon* if I, a single earthling, don’t face up to my neglected feelings, right?”

Ezekiel looked at me. <It will be worse,> he said simply.

I ignored him and made my exit.

Outside, I found a nice cozy rock and sat down and opened my phone. Thankfully, I had thought to charge my battery before the great escape. Since the phone only works on M-Facility servers, it’ll be useless after tonight. I’ll have to milk it while I can. Black Book is certainly trying to track it, but I know Ravana won’t let them find me. So I’m going to sit here and do what I have to do. I don’t care how long

it takes. As long as I have a battery, I will wait for Lorelei.

I sent her a simple text to start. *Are you still topside? I can get you out of here.*

It took her several minutes to answer. While I waited, I turned on my phone's flashlight and started writing all this in my journal. The sky roared with jet engines and helicopters. Mechanical buzzards.

No, came her reply. *They brought me back down right after. It's over, Maurus.*

What's going to happen to you? I wrote back. *It doesn't have to be over.*

Again, she took a long time to reply. I didn't know yet whether they suspected her or not. Either way, it was doubtful they had left her alone. Texting me must have taken a bit of stealth.

You shouldn't still be contacting me. Leave while you can. They want you to come back for me.

It doesn't matter what they want. It matters what you want. With me gone, they're going to want someone to blame. I will not leave you to be their scapegoat.

Another long wait. I sat patiently and wrote. If it didn't sound like a war zone overhead, it would have been a beautiful night. The air was warm, the wind calm.

They're tracking our phones, she said. *They can read everything. Even if I could get topside, they'd know you were coming. Which, I repeat, is exactly what they want. It's over, Maurus. You had the element of surprise to start this thing. But now that's gone. The base is on lockdown. Coming back would be suicide.*

Not when I have the saucer. You don't know what this thing can do. I could be in and out in no time. I mean that literally. Let them bring you topside. Let them read these messages. Let them lay their traps. It won't matter. I can get you out of there.

It was over thirty minutes before I heard from her next. Then: *That would be unbelievably reckless. And that's not you. Please. I'm asking you. I don't want you killed because of me. If you don't care about your own safety, think of me. For my sake, please leave. Run. You have Ezekiel. You have the saucer. Go.*

My safety is not a concern, I fired back. *It wouldn't be reckless. Or if it would, then so what? They will never catch me. I'm telling you, I can do this. I can get you out of there! Come with me. Please. I can't just leave you down there not knowing what they'll do to you.*

My vision blurred up as I typed that message. It took me a minute to realize they

were tears. It was odd. It felt like grief. Like I had lost something.

Twenty minutes later: *I'm sorry, Maurus. I won't take that risk. For you or for me. I'm not coming up. You need to run while you can. They're looking for you. They know you're close, otherwise we couldn't be texting. You don't have long before they find you. You need to run.*

The earth shook with the passing of jets. I stared into my phone. The soft light blurred again. I blinked repeatedly.

I will wait all night, I promised her. *If you change your mind, I'll be here. I won't leave you.*

This time, she responded in less than a minute. *I won't change my mind. Please go. Goodbye, Maurus…*

I sat with those words for a long moment. Their finality was crippling. What had I done? I ruined Lorelei's life, and she wouldn't let me try to fix it.

I will wait, I said again. Then, I wept.

She hasn't replied since. I've been waiting for well over an hour, checking my phone intermittently. I still have plenty of battery. I'll have no problem getting through the night. I'm not leaving. Not until the sun comes up. Until then, I will sit here and write. If dawn comes and there is no

It's all over. I'm finished. I don't have much time to write this.

I saw her. She *found* me. *She's real!* The Angel from my dreams, the bringer of death. Of all the people on this Earth, all the soldiers looking for me, all the assassins at Mr. Gray's disposal, the one who finds me is the one I dreamed of. She looked exactly the same—copper hair flowing over her shoulders, fiercely beautiful features. Like in my dreams, she reminded me of fire.

I *made* her real.

She killed my mother. I wasn't able to find out why she did it. Things happened too quickly, and it was all so *strange.* Obviously, she didn't succeed in murdering me. Ezekiel stepped in before she got the chance.

Her mistake was her curiosity. She kept asking about my mother—how I *felt* about the fact she had killed her. I could tell she was *intensely* interested in this. Though her body was expertly controlled and unnaturally still, her eyes were desperate. It was almost like she was the one under the gun, and my answers to her questions were the one thing that could save her.

It is unbelievable. It is simply beyond comprehension. How can she even exist? What is the likelihood to begin with? And then she

comes to me with questions about my mother, just as the aliens did. For a minute, I toyed with the idea that she was one of them. I know it's probably not true, but it isn't unthinkable either. Look at Ezekiel. The whole event could be seen as a "shock and awe" operation for my benefit, orchestrated by the aliens, to finally scare me into facing down the evil mother in my soul.

But the assassin *felt* human to me, and her horror at the sight of Ezekiel was too real. Ravana's light brought out every detail of her face. Her eyes were the color of autumn leaves, wildfires on the edge of winter. She and Ezekiel stared at each other for about thirty seconds. I have never seen more emotion on a person's face than hers in this moment. I can't hope to describe it and I don't have time to try. He must have made her see something. I don't think I'd like to know what it was.

When it was over, Ezekiel had one of his seizures. He fell and convulsed. The assassin fell too and dropped her gun. She didn't pick it back up again. I have it here in my lap. I'm trying to decide whether or not to use it. I'm hoping an answer will come to me as I write.

The assassin ran off as I grabbed Ezekiel and begged for his thrashing to stop. A small trail of foam dribbled out of his tiny mouth (he

looked like a classical “alien” again). I wiped it away with my shirt. A helpless gesture.

The seizure ended quickly. He turned those enormous eyes on me. They were like universes unto themselves, reflections of stars overhead glittering against the black. I brought his little body up over my knees and held him like a child.

<My work here is done,> he said in a way that could have been tender.

“No,” I whimpered. “Don’t talk like that. Don’t tell me that. I told you, I need your help.”

<You do not.> Even his silvery telepathic “voice” wavered now. <You have confronted the Angel of Death and you have survived. You don’t think you can handle a flying saucer?>

He bordered on humor with that last bit. For some reason, that scared me more than anything else he’d said. In a way, it reminded me of Bohm. “Please, you can’t…don’t you *want* to get better?”

He gazed at me with his eyes of legend. I realized that, from his view outside of time, they didn’t only see me there, as I was. They saw every *possibility* of me—not just everything I could *become,* but every single path I could have taken to get there, to that moment.

Three overlong fingers wrapped around my hand. <This body is nothing, Maurus. It is a

vehicle. There is no shortage of vehicles. Would you drive the same car forever?>

He didn't use the word "forever" in the casual way we humans often use it. He meant it literally. I eyed the assassin's gun. At the time, it was still lying in the dirt.

<Don't get any ideas,> he said, reading my thoughts. <You still have work to do in your vehicle. You can't escape it before it is done. Not even by dying.>

"Why should I believe that?" I asked weakly, unable to summon the venom with which I normally posed the question.

<Belief is irrelevant to what is…> Though he gave the impression of "trailing off," I knew he'd said all he wanted to say. Not one additional word was necessary. Ezekiel died in my arms, at precisely the moment he intended to. His bulbous head fell limp over my forearm. The pale, hazy "glow" that seemed always to surround him vanished, giving his body a more tangible, solid look than it ever held in life.

I didn't know whether to mourn him or curse him. My emotions were swirling and incoherent. It could have gone either way.

Before I could decide, a small black form buzzed in front of my face and landed on Ezekiel's forehead. I pulled my phone out of my

pocket and shined the flashlight with an odd sense of dread.

There, sitting right between Ezekiel's mythical eyes, was a stinkbug.

We stared at each other for a while, this stinkbug and I. The jets and choppers had stopped flying. The world was quieter than death. Soon, I began to laugh. Softly at first, even drowsily. But it escalated quickly. Within a minute, I was cackling so hard that I couldn't support myself. I fell back into the dirt. Ezekiel's corpse bobbed up atop my legs. The stinkbug stood firm, untroubled by the jostling.

I don't know how long I lay there, howling like a madman. It wasn't a short time. All I could see were stars. By the end, I felt that they were laughing with me.

Eventually, the stinkbug flew away. I collected myself and sat on my rock again and wrote all this down. Now, the first softness of dawn is spilling into the sky. Ravana tells me it's time to leave with a buzz of insect wings and a stream of light from eternity.

I'll leave this journal. Let Black Book find it. Or no one find it. It doesn't matter. It's a document of my attempts to think around and talk around something that exists regardless of what I say or think or document. I could bring it

with me. I could burn it. Either way, the thing exists.

I'll leave the gun too.

THIS REPORT IS SEALED BY ORDER OF THE EIGHT-POINTED STAR. MAY IT BE A RECORD THAT THE WILL OF OUR GREAT MOTHER HAS BEEN DONE. I HAVE HEARD HER CALL AND ANSWERED AS INSTRUCTED.

EGO VIVO VICI MUNDUM.

GLORY BE TO RAVANA.

-Director Menzel Gray

Acknowledgements

For what it's worth, none of the words in this book were written by AI. I did consult AI for research on a few science matters, but the plot, characters, setting, themes and tone for this novel were all born solely from the weirdness of my human brain.

Also a product of pure biology is the cover art, which was created by the brilliant and lovely Sasha Q, whose work I would encourage you to look up at: sashaq.art

Thanks are due as well to the philosophers Thomas Nagel and Huw Price, for partially inspiring the title of this novel.